
WALKING TOGETHER

PERILS OF PARTICIPATION IN ANTHROPOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION
A CASE STUDY IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Dissertation zur Erlangung der Würde einer Doktorin der Philosophie

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Introduction

Apartheid precludes any contact with people of different races that might undermine the assumption of essential difference.

— Vincent Crapanzano (1986: 40)

How does the systemic violence of apartheid, officially ended in the 1990s, still affect the everyday life of Black people in South Africa today? What vestiges of constitutional racial segregation have survived in habits and dispositions after a quarter century of democracy? How does racism, now no longer enshrined in law, linger in bodily practices of peoples' daily routines and interactions in South African public space?

These were the questions that initially animated my research for this book. They still, now that it is complete, crucially determine the scope of this work. But in the process of seeking empirical answers to these questions, a set of methodological challenges arose that each generated their own questions. How should I investigate the impact of racial discrimination without ever having been its target myself? How much of my own habits and dispositions would have to change in order for me to share, even just partially, the perceptual field of those I seek to comprehend? How could I possibly hope to understand the life experience of people so different from my own? Sharing the doubts of countless other anthropologists, I realized that I could not hope to do justice to the narratives of Black South Africans unless I was also at the same time willing to confront these questions about myself, my methods and the limits of my ability to perceive the realities of the people I sought to study.

My opening questions are paradigmatic of the sorts of questions that guide anthropological research, and my initial idea for how to investigate them followed classical anthropological methodology. I would rely greatly on qualitative empirical data derived from long term, on-site research. This kind of research is commonly known as Participant Observation.¹ A deliberately open description of two intertwined yet distinct modes of knowledge acquisition—observation and participation—Participant Observation promises access to local meanings of practices that co-create and reflect people's self-understanding of their everyday lives. As a particular mode of Participant Observation, I selected *walking together* with my research partners as a first gateway to the contextual, practical and non-

¹ Throughout this text, when 'Participant Observation' is discussed as a method-label, it will be capitalized as a proper noun. By contrast, participation and observation examined as separate activities, will follow the spelling of common nouns.

propositional knowledge I sought to harness for my ethnographic interpretations of the continual dividing effects of apartheid. My initial research questions about the living conditions of other people would thus be answered by means of my own experience *with* those people.

Conceived as a route to knowledge, however, Participant Observation faces its own set of serious epistemological problems. Some of these problems are eminently apparent when we consider the specific case of my own research of the life circumstances of Black people in post-apartheid South Africa. My research interest is with the effects of supremacy on the everyday life of people who suffer domination. Yet as a white, European woman, I myself belong to the “dominating” racial group. Entering a social space where interracial joint activities were legally banned for people who are still alive today, I am supposed to accumulate a stock of contextual knowledge that somehow puts me in the epistemic position to understand the activities I participate in as expressions of a distinct way of life. This self-appointed position will then allow me to draw conclusions from my impressions, justified mainly by my own beliefs about the nature of what happened. Yet my own positionality—my background, appearance and dispositions—seems to make the endeavor of producing perceptual common knowledge through participation in this context questionable at the very least.

The philosophical conundrum of participation, however, is more fundamental than the question whether I am similar enough to the people I seek to join. For even if I was a Black South African myself, a philosopher might ask: Is it even possible to “share” a perceptual field? How can we *ever* be sure that we have truly participated in another’s culture? What is it to participate, anyway? With this set of questions, which address the concept of participation inherent to Participant Observation, we have moved from an anthropological mode of inquiry to a philosophical one. Indeed, in just the same way that participation as part of a method helps to describe the discipline of anthropology does the method of conceptual analysis contribute to defining the discipline of philosophy.

For most philosophers of action, there is a special, necessary ingredient to a shared action, and that is shared *intention*. Accordingly, an action is considered to be shared only if there is at least some sense in which its participants have intended it together. It is the shared intention that separates the case of two friends who commute to work together from that of two strangers who merely happen to walk to work next to each other, despite their bodies moving exactly the same way in both cases. The point here is that participation is not (only) a matter of the right kind of bodily movement, but a matter of the attitudes that lie behind that movement. To participate in a shared action, the two individuals must intend to do the same thing. If we extend this thought to Participant Observation, this means that the kind of immersion anthropologists seek to achieve must go beyond behavioral mimicry: it must be an immersion of the mind.

Anthropologists tend not to take these sorts of theoretical questions into account when embarking on their fieldwork. They assume that understanding other people's practices is possible, despite vast differences in knowledge and experience. It is taken as self-evident that wholehearted, bodily participation is a gateway to knowledge of other cultures and forms of life.

There is clearly an important sense in which this assumption is correct. Most of the time, in our everyday lives, we have no trouble acting together with others. We succumb daily to the surrounding social rules and cultural norms without thinking twice, and simply participate in accordance with these norms that are either the fabric of our upbringing or recognized as addendums to our social tool kit. Our abiding tacit certainty that what *we* think is going on converges with what *our co-participants think* is a product of our daily experience: most of the time, things work out just fine. However, our certainty with regard to the successful execution of shared everyday action is connected to how little is at stake if we are wrong. Social misunderstandings either fail to surface or, if they do, are often no big deal. We should be allowed to ignore skeptical scenarios in everyday situations because high rigor with *all* knowledge claims is simply impractical. As long as things go roughly as expected, there is no need to call into question whether you and I have truly intentionally acted together.

While the kind of participation anthropologists seek to engage in is exactly this ordinary, everyday mode of interaction just described, the stakes for being right are higher. That is because anthropologists use participation in the service of producing scientifically admissible knowledge. What is needed, then, is more rigor—some sort of yardstick to measure the success of participatory research. Anthropologists are in a powerful position of interpreting other people's ways of life for a broader audience. What exactly they determine as participation matters—not only for their specialized scientific community, but for the greater narratives about cultures and peoples that are spun out of ethnographies bearing the authoritative stamp of high-rigor academic work. It is therefore critical for anthropological theory that we be clear about what participation is. How we answer the philosophical question of what participation is will feed into our understanding of how to conduct Participant Observation.

What it means to engage in a shared action, then, is a core question for both philosophy and anthropology. Both disciplines, although with different focal points and little conceptual consensus, seek to provide theoretical tools and empirical insights for the phenomenon of sociality and the shapes it takes in human everyday life. One aim of this work is to translate and connect those two strands of discourse to allow each of them to benefit from the other's findings. I will show how action theory and Participant Observation provide complementary studies of the contents and structures of "we-thoughts" which, when combined, provide novel insights into the understanding of mental events shaped by

a shared intention. Stepping beyond a strict dichotomy of “analytical *or* empirical” in my study of the social, I will examine how shared action comes into being in a specific social setting of human everyday life.

Let me spell out my overall aims. I have three interlinked concerns with a hierarchical structure: one ethnographic, another methodological and a third philosophical.

My ethnographic concern is with the life conditions of Black people in South Africa today. My case study will show how the discriminative nature of the past is still very much present in dispositions, mindsets and habits, and how both victimhood and emancipation from such a mindset is embodied in the everyday practice of walking. One of the guiding principles that transpires from a collective past into the present of individuals is *waiting*. The act of walking together, in its pacing, reveals waiting for the state as a mode of forcing Black South Africans into a position of powerlessness and lethargy. It also shows, however, how the Black population has responded to this with bodily modes of resistance, reclaiming power and agency by reclaiming physical, public space. Anthropologically, I will conclude that specific modes of walking practiced by the Black population of post-apartheid South Africa embody forms of victimhood, but also of resistance against a pervasive system of oppression.

Methodologically, my work is a critical exploration of Participant Observation as a context-bound, non-propositional method of research. Employing this method in a notoriously difficult social setting, I seek to show how common knowledge and shared intentions may exist between people whose backgrounds and experiences are vastly divergent. In this way, my dissertation is as much about the benefits of Participant Observation as a form of research as it is about its problems. I will show how both the problems and the epistemic benefits of the research method reside in the tension between misunderstanding and understanding, between the initial failure to partake in other people’s lifeworlds and the gradual success in participating. This transitional phase of learning—of bodily (re)habitualization, of adjustment of sensory receptiveness to what matters in a specific social context—is, I will claim, the ground of perceptual common knowledge that arises from it. I believe that, and will show how, the benefits outweigh the problems. Methodologically, I will conclude that Participant Observation is a problematic, yet uniquely fruitful way to gain contextual knowledge about the life circumstances of human beings.

My third, philosophical concern is with the conceptualization of participation as an ideal mode of practical knowledge gain. Participation, I argue, is a manner of acting together that depends on shared contextual knowledge not only of the shared social setting (“intercultural” shared knowledge), but also on authenticity and trust (“interpersonal” shared knowledge). I make the case for a qualitative conception of shared action, in place

of a causal one. Recommending an account of shared intention where the intention for a shared action resides in the action itself, rather than outside—as its cause—I will show how only a qualitative account can encompass the context-bound and interpersonal dimension of a shared intention, wherever people interact. We will see that there is both philosophical and empirical support for this claim.

The ethnographic concern comes first, in the sense that the philosophical and methodological inquiries each stand in the service of the initial anthropological questions they are responses to. But I also believe that my empirical study can serve both anthropological method building and action theory: My empirical data—the shared experiences of *walking together*—will be used to carve out a set of real conditions under which participatory knowledge is gained and highlight avenues of how to meaningfully and responsibly produce ethnography. In this, my research seeks to contribute to method building. Exploring the conditions of participation *through* the method of Participant Observation will advance the definition of the analytically established concepts of shared action and intention.

The shared action I employ—walking together—is one that bears significance both within the philosophical tradition of action theory and within the anthropological tradition of participating as a mode of research. Philosophers of action often use the case of walking together as a kind of intuition pump to carve out necessary and sufficient conditions for shared actions—in part because of its apparent simplicity in comparison with other forms of shared action. Meanwhile, this habitual, shared practice finds practical application as a mode of Participant Observation in anthropology. On the one hand, it is accessible, universal and habitual, but on the other hand its manner of exercise depends on its context-specific value and the lifeworld it is embedded in. Walking together thus serves as an intersection where the two disciplines meet, providing an excellent opportunity for genuinely interdisciplinary research. The result will be a refined conception of participation that is both philosophically informed and empirically underpinned.

The empirical field: Makhanda

Home to one of the world's most unequal societies, South Africa is grappling with the dividing effects of an oppressive system of racial segregation. Apartheid may have ended formally as a political initiative, but it survives in deep geographic and economic inequalities that exist between white and Black populations. This enduring legacy is what I went to South Africa to study.

My field site is Makhanda, formerly known as Grahamstown; a small city in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. To date, Makhanda suffers from blatant socio-economic disparities and low levels of interracial social cohesion. The largest part of Makhanda consists of township, which stretches over the entire eastern side of the city and

is home to most of its Black population. For the most part, people continued to live in the same districts as they did when the system of racial segregation was legally intact. With a high population density, poor living conditions and a current unemployment rate above 40%, thousands of people inhabit close-packed homes and makeshift shacks.

The effects of a system that, as Vincent Crapanzano observed, precluded any contact between people of different races that could undermine the assumption of essential difference (1986: 40) are not only geographically and economically visible, but also tangible in the shared bodily everyday practices and dispositions of Black people. Walking together, in this context, becomes an experimental practice, a participatory act of perceptual knowledge transfer. My empirical work is dedicated to this experience and my reflections upon it. I will focus on the habituality of walking, and indicate ways in which non-propositional knowledge can be shared in the absence of its verbal expression. Gaining perceptual knowledge about and through different modes of walking will allow me to shed light on my lines of argument under the headings of my analytic question of how a shared intention comes into being. I will thus be able to reconnect with my analytical claims about how perceptual common knowledge emerges and, if all goes well, can be put into propositional form.

The methodological field: participation and observation

The historical development of anthropology as a scientific discipline is accompanied by the positivist endorsement of testing hypothesis. By predetermining what to observe before even entering the field, this school of anthropologists follows the idea that Participant Observation requires the researcher to first determine what and where to observe and to participate, to then follow through with it as planned.

This dissertation takes a firm stance against such a view, offering instead an understanding of Participant Observation that commits to inductive interpretation and theory building. My main claim is that Participant Observation *interlocks* two distinct types of research. Observation, on the one hand, is guided by attention. What we pay attention to—that is, *how* we see things as well as *what* we notice—depends on our dispositions and habits. These tacitly guide our attention to what we normally observe, or to the unusual: Attention emerges in situations where we have (been) trained to be observant, or where habits are disrupted by the *extraordinary*. Either way, what we observe is affected by our habits about where to look, and what to look *for*.

Participation, on the other hand, *generates* attention, and therewith overlapping perspectives. Each time we join into a specific practice with others, we adjust our senses to what matters in the lifeworlds of those who allow us to participate. We are taught, by and by, what is worth observing. In this sense, observation is not opposed to participation, but bound up with it.

Framing Participant Observation as a method that interlaces different levels of perception will excavate its potency to overcome the binary distinction between observation as detached and participation as engaged. My aim is to show how observation and participation each play their part in the hermeneutics of contextual understanding.

This is not to say that these two ways of perceiving are always in balance. Indeed, as my empirical findings will show, one tends to prevail over the other. Also, a single act of observation does not have to be simultaneously participatory. My work, however, shall vindicate the claim that participation and observation inform each other's epistemological accomplishments. Together, they are channeled by anthropologists as complementary tools to adapt their habits and dispositions to local processes of perceiving and doing things. The aim is attentive immersion, as I call this gradual adjustment of the senses mediated by Participant Observation. Attentive immersion can be understood as a realistic goal or an unattainable ideal. My methodological contribution consists of an in-depth exploration of the tension between these two options. I will point out ways in which the tension between certainty and doubt itself is a source for epistemic benefit.

One thesis of this dissertation is that Participant Observation as a method of research is worth pursuing not despite, but in virtue of its methodological and epistemological challenges. I will conclude that uncertainty, misunderstanding and failure to perceptually immerse oneself is part and parcel of the methodological merits of Participant Observation.

The theoretical field: philosophical and anthropological approaches

Within contemporary philosophy of action, discussions of shared action and intention are shaped by reductionist assumptions. It is often supposed that we will understand willing, intending and acting together by first understanding individual wills, intentions, mental states or attitudes. So-called "simple" cases of shared intentional action—cases stripped of the broader social context in which collective actions are inextricably embedded—are taken as the logical starting point out of which theories of the "advanced" or "complex" cases of shared action are then to be built. I will highlight the need to "de-idealize" philosophical theories of shared action by challenging the oversimplified conceptions of shared agency they often rely on, and lay bare particular presumptions of how a specific practice should be executed. We will find that approaches which attempt to understand group action as a mere summation or extension of individual action do not convincingly capture our common-sense intuitions about social groups. By considering the everyday life of pedestrians in Makhanda we will also see that there is no such thing as a "simple" case: all shared intentional actions, *especially* the everyday, habitual ones, are highly complex, asymmetrical and often emerge from non-propositional knowledge. Unfolding the origins of the reductionist error in contemporary philosophy of action will lead us back to the fork

in the road where philosophical debate on shared action took a turn away from the particular forms of life it seeks to describe, instead aiming for conceptual distinctions stripped of the particularity of human agency.

Anthropological attempts to shift the discussion away from this kind of de-contextualized—or, as I will also suggest: Western—conception of agency have largely remained within their disciplinary boundaries. In addition, the epistemological foundation of Participant Observation is rarely questioned. Incorporating anthropological methodology into philosophical action theory will help to bridge that gap. My empirical case study can be applied not only in anthropological studies of the social, but also in philosophical studies of shared action. I will show how ethnography can enrich philosophical theories of shared action in ways that thought experiments cannot. I will thus challenge the mainstream of contemporary action-theoretical debate. By introducing a set of traits a shared intentional action can have—and arguably normally *has*—and that are currently excluded by most contemporary philosophical work on shared action, I will highlight the importance of considering “real life cases” and empirical studies of the social for a fruitful conception of joint action. Das, Jackson, Kleinman and Singh have noted that what

the anthropologist’s work *may* have in common with philosophy [is] the task of bringing experience nearer to reality by generating concepts from life rather than taking them from abstract discussions and thought experiments and fitting them to the flow of experience. (2000: 6, my emphasis)

I will follow this track of possible goal commonality, creating an intersection between philosophy of action, anthropological theory, and case study.

I should like to emphasize here already that my aim is not to engage philosophy to “provide theory”—as if anthropology were somehow missing this impulse. As the above quoted team of scholars point out, “critical anthropology does not simply receive its questions from philosophy; nor does it take reality as already philosophically questioned” (ibid.: 23). Rather, I want to make visible a necessary interdependency and interplay between experience and theory, depicting it as an ongoing confrontation of fieldwork and its assumption of shared action and intention. I will advocate the pursuit of “a double place of experience and theory” (ibid.: 14). What will emerge as a thread running through this work is the relation between reflection and experience, or alternatively, between thinking and doing. The tension between reflection and experience will function as the linchpin for this investigation. Participation will function as a cross-disciplinary concept, informing a constructive dialogue between different ways—analytically and synthetically—of understanding the social. The act of walking together will function as the practical gateway to a first person plural experience of shared bodily practice. The goal is reconciliation

between distinct strands of thinking within the two disciplines. In this way, I seek to show how anthropology can be seen as a way of doing philosophy, and vice versa.

Mapping the fields: chapter structure

This book seeks to shed light on the complex relations among empirical evidence, scientific explanations, ideological assumptions, and practical implications in research on participation. The five chapters to follow are each guided by a sub-topic working in the explanatory service of this topical conglomerate.

Chapter 1 discusses the significance of participation for anthropology, introducing the role of Participant Observation in the history of anthropology and raising three challenges the research method faces. “The tension between the particular and the general” is identified as a methodological challenge, which raises the question of how the anthropologist gets to claim universal truths based on unique encounters. “The challenge of context-dependence” addresses the problem of univocally deciding when one knows enough to understand the meaning of a specific practice in the larger context of an unfamiliar cultural setting. Finally, “the challenge of non-propositional knowledge” discusses how this kind of non-verbal knowledge typically emerging in anthropological fieldwork can result in a printed ethnography. This challenge consists in how to verbalize perceptual common knowledge gained through participation that is itself non-propositional. The second and third challenges have methodological consequences, but are both philosophical in nature. Both are concerned with the question of what participation ideally brings to light and, basically, what participation is.

Chapter 2 introduces philosophy of action as an aid to tackle the challenge of context-dependence and of non-propositional knowledge. Using the philosophical insight that participation is necessarily intentional, I will explore three rival theories of how to conceptualize shared intentional action and argue for the importance of shared intentions for the emergence of a shared action—and, by extension, of participation. The first account to be discussed is Michael Bratman’s planning theory of acting together, followed by Margaret Gilbert’s plural subject theory and, thirdly, an account on shared intention according to G.E.M. Anscombe’s conception of intention. Raising problems internal to each account, but also with regard to their aptness for anthropological method building, I will indicate core features of an action theory able to track complex everyday occurrences of the social phenomenon that is participation.

Taking up an example for participation discussed in both anthropology and philosophy, chapter 3 is entitled *Walking together, from an ideal to the real*. This middle chapter marks a turning point between purely theoretical considerations of participation and a practical understanding of what it is to participate. It introduces walking together as a paradigmatic example for a shared action in both philosophy of action and

anthropological research. In philosophy of action, walking together has become a thought-experimental model to discuss conditions of shared action. The practice is presented as a simple, small-scale shared action. The basic premise is that the reader, the author and the made-up protagonists of the example share sufficient cultural background that what it is to walk together is a shared idea from the beginning and can be presumed in order to get to the details of an account on how to succeed in doing it. By contrast, walking together from an anthropological perspective is an example for a habitual, bodily practice that carries a wide range of potential context-specific meanings and is explored in its particularity. This double status of walking together as both a paradigm case of a shared action and a context-sensitive mode of empirical research makes it a suitable candidate to compare and scrutinize philosophical and anthropological methodology for a better understanding of Participant Observation as a mode of research. The example of walking together will be confronted with the remaining of the three challenges, the first, methodological challenge of the tension between the particular and the general.

Chapter 4 marks the beginning of my empirical case study about the remnants of constitutional racial segregation a quarter century after the end of apartheid. This chapter introduces my field site Makhanda, and South Africa more broadly, in its present state and in the context of its historical background. I will present details about my ethnographic self, my empirical research approach, and my array of failures to connect. This first of two empirical chapters is dedicated to the experiential domain of misunderstanding, rejection and racial tension between a white researcher and her Black research partners in a social setting laden with essentialist, racist survivals of suppression of one race by the other. The context-specific meaning of waiting and interrelated, racialized perceptions of what time is worth will be discussed in relation to victimhood, deprivation of perspective and stagnation forced upon the so-called “free-born” generation of Black South Africans by the remnants of an oppressive system of inequality. The chapter concludes that to go for a walk with someone, in order to count as a shared intentional action with the epistemic benefits advertised by Participant Observation, presupposes a shared awareness of what matters to the context in which the shared practice takes place—an awareness I knew I did not have.

Finally, in chapter 5, I will discuss the asset of long-term fieldwork while and by revisiting my errors in the service of a beneficial reading of Participant Observation. This final chapter thematized walking together as a mode of resistance. Revising previous interpretations of victimhood and stagnation, I will offer an account of agency that reshapes power structures “from below”, that is, from a position of waiting. I will conceptualize the notion of interpersonal trust, points of commonalities and vulnerability, and place each of them in a conceptual framework of shared intentions necessary for the shared action of walking together as a context-specific, non-propositional shared intentional action. Guided by my learning experience of absent and present shared intentions of walking together with

my research partners, I will here offer answers to my initial research questions about how the systemic violence of apartheid still affects the everyday life of Black people in South Africa today. I will show how racist oppression lingers in habitual bodily practices of people's daily routines and interactions in Makhanda's public space, and how in tacit, bodily ways of responding we can detect non-propositional acts of liberation from victimhood.

In the end, the "perils of participation", as evoked in the title of this thesis, should be understood in all their gravity but seen as worthwhile hurdles that can be tackled more efficiently with the help of my findings. Participant Observation, as practiced by anthropologists, will emerge as a superior method of understanding what human modes of acting together are, and can be, about.

Chapter 1

Participation in Social Anthropology

One of the advantages of anthropology as a scholarly enterprise is that no one, including its practitioners, quite knows exactly what it is.

— Clifford Geertz (2000: 89)

1.1 Introduction

For many people, the idea of anthropology may immediately and irresistibly conjure a certain image of the *anthropologist*. They may envisage a man, somewhat academic-looking and almost certainly Caucasian, weighed down with a camera and notebooks, sitting in the midst of a tribe of scantily clad, bush-dwelling “natives”. They may picture his excitement as he frantically scribbles down or otherwise records the various activities—dancing, chanting, crafting woven blankets, getting tattoos—that make up the culture of that tribe. Every now and then he will be asked to throw a spear or eat a snake, which he will do with the engaging conviction of an adventurer or the aloof reluctance of a gentleman.

This image is, of course, a stereotype. Like other stereotypes of its kind—the bearded philosopher who uncovers universal truths without ever leaving the known comfort of his study or the crazy-haired chemist mixing bottles of many-colored liquids to produce increasingly dramatic explosions—it overlooks the diversity that nowadays exists amongst both researchers and their research interests. Yet we can also find some insight contained within this image—insight that is reflected in how anthropologists themselves have understood what is central to their own discipline. Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley take anthropological fieldwork to involve “the ethnographer overtly and covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions—in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research” (2007: 248). Thomas Hylland Eriksen defines anthropology as “the comparative study of cultural and social life,” whose “most important method is Participant Observation, which consists in lengthy fieldwork in a specific social setting” (2010: 4). The common thread between the stereotype and these attempts at a scholarly definition is that the essence of anthropology as a discipline resides not only in *what* anthropologists study (the subject-matter of anthropology), but also in *how* they study it (the methodology of anthropology). If the goal at which anthropologists

aim is, at its most general level, an understanding of the variety of forms that human cultures and practices take, then what distinguishes them from their colleagues in sociology or history departments (who many times share overlapping goals) is their conviction that the best route to achieve this goal is through a methodological procedure of active engagement with the cultures that are being studied.

This method of engaged observation is typically discussed under a range of headings, including “fieldwork”, “ethnography” and “Participant Observation”.² “Fieldwork” is loosely used by anthropologists to refer to time spent in the social setting of their scientific interest. “Ethnography” more commonly denotes either the process of writing down one’s experiences—the *ethno-graphy*—or the final product of both fieldwork and its analysis in the form of a book, essay or journal paper.³ “Participant Observation” is an umbrella term for a range of methods which conceptually overlap with ethnography and fieldwork while additionally specifying the manner of empirical engagement (Spradley 1980; Holt 2006).

Following anthropology’s emphasis on qualitative methods, various textbooks define Participant Observation along the lines of an “engagement in social interaction between the researcher and informants in the milieu of the latter” (Taylor and Bodgan 1984: 15), thus “exploring the nature of particular social phenomena” (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007: 248). The *SAGE Handbook of Social Anthropology* suggests Participant Observation means “living in a culture that is not your own while also keeping a detailed record of your observations and interviews” (2012: xii).

For all these attempts at defining Participant Observation, there remains a sense of vagueness surrounding its specific aims and assets. One is inclined to ask: *How do participation and observation work together to produce reliable knowledge? What exactly is revealed, gained, or understood by participation? How can we be sure we have participated—and not merely observed? What is the asset, perhaps the unique strength of this kind of knowledge hunt, focused on a series of unique interpersonal encounters rather than repeatable social experiments?*

The singular research methods of anthropology come with their own singular set of epistemological and methodological questions. Anthropology has been grappling with such questions ever since it became self-critical.⁴ However, as will emerge throughout this

² Additionally, one finds hybrid conceptions such as “observant participation” that emphasize observation over participation (Seim 2021) and specifications such as “thick participation” wherein methodological focus is laid on bodily participation (Samudra 2008). Alternative spellings are present, too. For instance, Harry F. Wolcott observes in his discussion of “Participant Observation: The Catch-all Label” (1999: 44) that the hyphenated “participant-observation” is sometimes employed to highlight the connection between two activities that might otherwise appear as antithetical (ibid.). Barbara Tedlock, offering yet another variation, uses “observation of participation” to underscore how anthropologists observe their own and others’ participation within ethnographic encounters (1991).

³ At times, however, “ethnography” is used more widely, to denote the “practice of immersive engagement with the everyday messiness of human lives” (Kohn 2015: 313) or “the art and science of describing a group or culture” (Fetterman 1998: 1).

⁴ The beginning of self-critical anthropology dates back to the writing culture movement of the 1980s, whose most prominent formulation can be found in Clifford and Marcus (1986). The movement put into focus literary criticism and

chapter, some epistemological presuppositions of Participant Observation are still frequently taken for granted in ways that appear problematic. Proponents of Participant Observation assume not only that participation in cross-cultural social settings is possible, but that it yields a gateway to a deeper understanding of human practices. Both assumptions have been called into question. It remains, moreover, a notoriously murky issue how the kind of knowledge gained by participation is to be transmitted to those who have not participated, and in what way this kind of knowledge surpasses or at least complements the kind of knowledge gained in the armchair or the laboratory.

This chapter will familiarize the reader with the problems around participation in Participant Observation. The chapter is organized in three sections. Section 1.2 broaches the issue of participation in the history of anthropology, examining how Participant Observation was employed and conceptualized at its origins and engaging anthropology's own understanding of its defining methodology. Section 1.3 will spell out a set of core questions for anthropological methodology, highlighting three critical challenges facing Participant Observation. Finally, section 1.4 will focus on the role bodily experience has played in participatory ethnographies of the last three decades, stressing conceptual lacunae in anthropological accounts of learning through bodily engagement. By the end of the chapter, the main problems with Participant Observation should be clear and ready to be confronted, in the following chapter, with a set of philosophical attempts to conceptualize participation. Notwithstanding the critical tone, the journey we will embark on throughout subsequent chapters will ultimately be a positive one for Participant Observation. Grappling with the problems presented here, these accounts, but also my empirical data presented in the subsequent chapters, will ultimately allow us to see what makes anthropology, with its emphasis on participation and long-term fieldwork, an irreplaceable and vital source in the quest to understand human forms of life.

I opened this chapter with a quotation from the distinguished anthropologist Clifford Geertz. The foregoing comments already suggest a way of understanding part of his intriguing pronouncement that no one quite knows exactly what anthropology is. If anthropology is defined by its use of the method Participant Observation, and if the many problems with Participant Observation remain unresolved, then it follows that we do not yet have a solid grasp on what anthropology is. Part of my aim in the chapters to follow will be to offer a defense of that methodology—and this will involve producing answers to at least some of these questions. But I also wish to draw attention to another crucial part of Geertz's claim: that this ignorance, or unawareness, is one of the "advantages" of anthropology. Geertz frames what seems like a critique as a virtue. We should actively keep in mind, as we work through the questions surrounding Participant Observation, that what

conceptual analysis of the textual representation of the relationship between anthropologists and the people represented.

may seem at first to be challenging dark spots of the anthropological method may yet turn out not to be problems at all.

1.2 Participant Observation: the emergence of a method

The empiricist [...] thinks he believes what he sees, but he is much better at believing than at seeing.

— Santayana (1923: 201)

The method of observation is part of the history of Western scientific thinking, being a crucial cornerstone of the “scientific method” and taking a leading role in any empirical research where data is consistently and unobtrusively collected. When Francis Bacon’s proposal for a scientific method that relied on repeatable observations became widely acknowledged in the 17th century, the sciences as we understand them today began to act on the assumption that observation is essential for the extraction of scientific knowledge (Hallam 1854: 514-517).⁵ This idea built the foundation of empiricism. Most prominently found in the works of the so-called “British Empiricists”, including Locke (1975) and Hume (2014), empiricism holds that all theories—including theories about social life—must be tested against observation of the natural world.

With this development, the seed for subsequent positivist thinking was planted and continued to weed into the methodology of anthropological research. The belief that only observational evidence that is rationalized with the tools of logic can be a source of scientific knowledge affected anthropology in the sense that it became normal to think of observation as a method in its own right. The underlying presumption was that observation can be practiced objectively, and that the social world can be analyzed and dissected in the same way that those in the natural sciences conduct experiments.⁶

In adopting a methodology of *Participant Observation*, social anthropology is moved by the conviction that when researching the social life of others, mere observation is not enough. The ethnographer must participate in the social practices of others, using her body as a “research tool” to access their lifeworlds. One of the figures who had a profound influence on the professional identity of modern anthropology in this respect is

⁵ The then new epistemic status of the experiment emerging in a positivist spirit also induced the idea of observation as a scientific method. Observation became a part of the experiment and was not merely a bodily, unsystematic function below theory anymore. Before the establishment of the experiment as the prevalent method of empirical research, observation had been regarded as a merely passive way to understand the natural world, whereas later it became part an active way to “rip off nature’s curtains”. For a historically minded discussion of the development of observation as a research method, see Kwaschik 2018.

⁶ For a compelling analysis of different modes of observation, see Gallagher’s *Seeing without an I* (2015). Gallagher treats the difference between object-perception and person-perception and argues for fundamental differences in what he calls gaze, depending on whether one is interacting with others or gazing alone. According to Gallagher, one’s observation practice changes fundamentally when practiced with others.

Bronislaw Malinowski, to whom the original idea of systematic definition and use of Participant Observation as a method is often attributed.⁷ In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1961), Malinowski propounded a methodological shift that would sustainably change the face of anthropology. His vision of how “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world” (ibid: 25, original emphasis) was research *in situ*. Rather than conducting observatory studies from the planks of missionary verandas and colonial houses, Malinowski found it indispensable to share in the lives and activities of those being studied. Participant Observation, as Malinowski would have it, demanded for a research period of at least one seasonal cycle, learning and working in the native language, and becoming a member of the community that is being studied. He thereby challenged the hitherto dominant paradigm of research conducted from afar.⁸

Overall, Participant Observation emerged as a principal approach to ethnographic research in the first half of the twentieth century. The veranda was abandoned for *the field*, and “armchair anthropologist” became a pejorative term (see e.g. Gluckman 1945). In Geertz’s interpretive anthropology of the early 1970s, anthropology found a first powerful response to the positivism of anthropology (Geertz 2004b).⁹

It is worth pausing to consider why anthropologists should have been so dissatisfied with the prevailing methodology adopted by the sciences. The term “observation” comes with heavy historical baggage. It was a technical term used by the police of absolutist France in the first half of the 17th and the second half of the 18th century, closely linked to the French *surveillance*. To observe was to spy on suspect individuals with the propounded objectivity of an absolute state.¹⁰ These connotations are obviously unfortunate for those wishing to openly and respectfully observe their research partners’ activities. Participant Observation represents the visible involvement of the researcher in a society through sharing linguistic and non-linguistic practices with members of that society, whereas observation is often taken to mean distancing oneself from these practices. Till Förster, arguing that certain

⁷ Before Malinowski, W.H.R. Rivers (1912) had laid first conceptual foundations for the method. However, his aim was description of human behavior rather than a holistic understanding of its intentional groundings. Considering the idea of moving beyond mere observation of behavior, it is crucial to note that Lewis Henri Morgan (born 1818) and Franz Boas (born 1858)—both distinct key figures in American cultural anthropology—had already begun to empirically employ the combined means of participation and observation in the late 19th century (see Morgan 2013 and Boas 1989). Finally, to add an example of early writing on selective participatory and observatory fieldwork practice from beyond the boundaries of strictly academic writing, it is worth mentioning the explorer Heinrich Barth, who had discovered the advantage of distant observation and engaged participation to learn about unfamiliar cultural and social structures in the 1850s (Barth 1857/58; see also Spittler 2014). It was Malinowski’s writing, however, which gave Participant Observation its distinct shape.

⁸ In the same book, Malinowski states that the aim of anthropology is “to *construct* the picture of the big institution, very much as the physicist constructs his theory from the experimental data, which always have been within reach of everybody, but needed a consistent interpretation” (ibid.: 84, original emphasis). His view was that the “savages” he studied had “no knowledge of the *total outline* of any of their social structure” (ibid.: 83, original emphasis), and that it was the job of the anthropologist to draw the connections. He therewith drew a sharp line between the limited descriptions and views of his interlocutors and the anthropologist’s capacity to overlook and analyze.

⁹ For a comprehensive overview of the origins and evolution of social anthropology, see Clifford and Marcus (1986). For a critical extrapolation of these thoughts, see Hardin and Clarke (2012).

¹⁰ Bourdieu has dwelled on this connotation of observation in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977).

insights can only be generated through participation, puts the point bluntly: “[T]here is no way to access this other lifeworldly reality [...] by mere observation” (2011: 7).¹¹

Another crucial omission from the traditional empiricist picture is any real attempt to reflect on what makes us observe certain things in the first place. What Tim Ingold has recently labelled *attentionality* (2018a) has been explored in detail under the heading of *awareness* (expressed in German as the tension between *sehen* and *beobachten*) in two closely related papers by Gerd Spittler (2001) and Förster (2001). According to this account, seeing and observing are different in that only the latter practice necessarily requires awareness. Spittler and Förster argue that much of the everyday life of others is *not* accessible through observation, which they describe as a conscious and intentional act, preceded by a preexisting awareness of what one wants to observe (Förster *ibid.*: 6-7). Being able to observe certain visible parts of our everyday world emerges from awareness, which in turn has to grow gradually and contextually, through participation.

Despite the many advantages of a method in which observation occurs in combination with active participation, Participant Observation has repeatedly been subject to challenges and subsequent alterations (see e.g. Stoller 1989; Marcus 1998; Förster 2001; Jackson 2005; and Kesselring 2017). One clue to the conceptual challenges inherent in Participant Observation is contained in its name. Participation and observation are ostensibly two quite distinct types of action; as such, Participant Observation can seem to involve an uneasy combination of two bodily activities that at first might seem mutually exclusive. Is the anthropologist meant to observe and participate simultaneously?

This conceptual tension has led to a heated debate. Some scholars think of Participant Observation as an oxymoron (Behar 1996; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Okely 2012; Förster 2022), arguing that observation inherently generates the kind of distance that participation is intended to overcome. According to this view, the lumping together of the two terms obliterates a vital distinction between a (seemingly) passive, objective endeavor and its active, subjective counterpart. The dichotomy between these concepts is, to critics of Participant Observation, a problem glossed over by the unthinking grouping of the two terms. Okely suggests that we should not understand participation and observation as a continuum, but find distinctive places for each (2012: 79-80). According to Förster, the conceptual combination occludes the scientific history of observation, as evoked above. Responding to these criticisms, Tim Ingold has recently argued that there is no contradiction between participation and observation; on the contrary, the one is impossible without the other (2018a: 23-27). According to Ingold, observation is one sensory way of paying attention and to pay attention entails that the movements of the observer are already coupled, in perception and action, to those of the things that hold her interest. Thus, the

¹¹ Taking this argument one step further, Stoller's *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989) shows the importance of not only our visual organs, but also taste and smell.

participatory coupling of perception and action is a precondition for observation. In effect, according to this view, one cannot observe what another is doing without already participating with them in at least this minimal sense.

This apparent disagreement can be resolved by noting that the two views point to different aspects of Participant Observation that in many ways complement each other. Conceptually, it makes sense to distinguish participation from observation, as the first camp suggests, for it helps us remember the conceptual heritage and baggage of *observation*.

Additionally, this conceptual separation invites the idea of a spectrum between participation and observation. Such a spectrum allows for methodologically fine-grained tracking of particular situations being responded to in degrees by observation and/or participation. One could, for instance, imagine a situation that requires the researcher to remain in the background, mainly observing other's activities. On this side of the spectrum, participation is limited to mere physical co-presence. By contrast, one could imagine intense physical participation, perhaps accompanied by exhaustion, trance, discomposure or pain. On this side of the spectrum, observation is overpowered by the participatory intensity of the moment. Methodologically, the conceptual distinction helps distinguish between levels of engagement.

In practice, though, our actions oscillate between observation and participation, and it appears awkward to cling on to the distinction *as* we walk, dance, or craft something together. Rather, the flow of everyday life, as Ingold suggests, allows us to immerse ourselves in observations, participations and everything in between (Ingold 2018a). Förster (2022) is right to point out that the two may well happen at the same time, but from analytical point of view, they are each distinct. With this, however, he directs us towards an issue with Participant Observation much deeper than the epistemological heritage of observation. Förster's point is not just that observation induces distance and participation fosters proximity, but that there is an additional quality to participation that needs addressing separately: While participation can exist without constant, conscious awareness of its execution, observation is defined through attention (which, as elucidated in Förster 2001, makes it different from mere seeing). Participation is thus not necessarily guided through all-pervasive awareness, while observation has to be willfully directed. With that, the problem of putting together or setting apart observation and participation becomes a twofold dispute: one with regard to definition, another with regard to its epistemological implications for the method of Participant Observation. We will dig into definitory issues of participation in chapter 2. In the remainder of this chapter, we will consider its epistemological implications.

1.3 Three challenges for Participant Observation

The previous section considered why anthropologists have been attracted by a methodology that combines the seemingly distant gaze of observation with active participation in human practices. It also anticipated some of the problems that might arise for a methodology that combines two conceptually distinct activities: observation and participation.

To be sure: My claim is not that each act of observation is also, simultaneously, an act of participation. Rather, my claim is that participation forms attentional habits that will (re)direct future observation. Bodily experience of participation affects what we pay attention to. Participation highlights specific aspects of the world, aspects that we are thus more prone to notice and to observe in future encounters. In this way, to repeat my introductory claim, observation is not separate from participation, but bound up with it.

In this section, we will delve more deeply into some of the tensions inherent in Participant Observation. These can be organized under three main headings: the tension between the particular and the general; the role of context; and the centrality of non-propositional knowledge. These three problems, perhaps immanent in all shared action, become particularly visible when encountered as part of fieldwork. They represent an open list. I do not claim for it to be complete nor do I put the three aspects in a specific order. They each represent facets of fieldwork practice that are to be considered in a theory of participation apt for ethnographies.

1.3.1 Tensions between the particular and the general

The first chapter of Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (2004b) is dedicated to the significance of *thick description*:¹²

It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers. It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. (ibid.: 16)

Geertz's dictum echoes a recurring theme in textbooks, encyclopedias, university websites and other sources concerning how academic anthropology perceives itself: the value the

¹² One of Geertz's main contributions to anthropology was the import of "thick descriptions" into the normative framing of ethnographic work. The purpose of a thick description, as Geertz claimed, was to describe and interpret a social phenomenon in sufficient detail so that the reader could comprehend the conclusions drawn by the author. Geertz interpreted Gilbert Ryle's notion of thick descriptions in the sense that behavior is either meaningless or meaningful, and that a thick description contains not only the description of behavior, but also its specific meaning. (See Ryle's 1986 printed lectures entitled *Thinking and Reflecting* and his 1971 paper "The Thinker of Thoughts".) Geertz concludes, in what is ultimately a controversial reading of Ryle, that meaning and behavior are two distinct phenomena. He asserts that the meaningless is different from the meaningful behavior in that the former lacks something that is present in the latter: it is an additional, separate thing to notice.

anthropologist bestows through their empirical research lies in its *abstraction from or generalization of the particular*. A good case study takes the practical knowledge that is generated through participation to have an instrumental value. Fieldwork is useful to the extent that it generates ethnographic theory. A book-length account on how I went for daily walks with a group of Black women in the townships of Makhanda is, according to this view, not an ethnography considered in its own right. To become such, my practical, long-term learning process must be molded into the abstract building blocks of an argument. My particular experience must be checked for its potential transferability to more general claims about a specific social setting, a way of being together or, most generally, human agency, from whence ethnographic theory can then be induced. The aim of Participant Observation, according to this strand, would thus be to *X* together in order to find out what *X* can be *an expression of*. The goal is to come to an understanding of what it is to *X* in general, and not to understand a mere instance of *X-ing per se*.

This conception of anthropology belongs to a long tradition, prominent defenses of which can be found in Michael Jackson's existential anthropology (2005) and in Tim Ingold's vision of a "one world anthropology" (2018b). According to Jackson's view, there is a peculiar need to distance oneself from the episode in which one was embedded in order to interpret it. This "dialectic between engagement and disengagement" (2014: 27), between present instances and their future interpretations, finds explicit expression in Jackson's thoughts on ethnography in general, where he states that ethnographers typically rely on immersed participation to then offer arguments to abstract from the habitual everyday life of individuals (Jackson 2014: 27). A tension between tacit everyday knowledge and conscious reflection is assumed, and the act of distancing ourselves from the world by theorizing seems to be in opposition to the ethnographer's concern to understand the details of human experience. To emphasize the danger of two extremes—empty theorizing on the one hand and not seeing the wood for the trees on the other—Jackson draws on Wittgenstein, who was himself trying to understand what would later become known as the "rule following problem". In order to narrow the gap between theory and practice, according to this view, we need to get ourselves off the

slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk" and back "to the rough ground" where our feet, and our thoughts, can gain some purchase. (Wittgenstein, PI: §107; quoted in Jackson 2014: 27)¹³

Here, the slippery ice represents pure theorizing: analysis or synthesis of existent scholarship. The friction depicts empiricism: experience gained in practice such as

¹³ All following citations of Wittgenstein refer to the consecutively numbered paragraphs in the *Philosophical Investigations* (2009), abbreviated with "PI".

participation. With this interpretation, Jackson identifies what he takes to be the key challenge to which Participant Observation must rise. Ethnographic fieldwork must be a constant dialectic between near and far, in which

human consciousness oscillates between moments of complete absorption in an immediate situation and moments of detachment—when we stand back and take stock of what we are doing, how we are doing it, and why. (ibid)

One place in which this tension between the general and the particular can be found is in the commonly employed device of vignettes. Vignettes have become a popular way of introducing a situation in the field to the reader.¹⁴ They enable ethnographers to communicate their impressions of a specific interaction through literary narration, thus allowing the reader to empathize with the author's perspective. Employed in various ways and to serve different purposes (depending on their length, their placement in the rest of the text and their mediated content), they convey “[s]tories about individuals, situations and structures [in order to] make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes” (Hughes 1998: 381).¹⁵ Paradigmatically described as “a literary device whose purpose is to place the question in the reader’s mind and to set an emotional tone over the material that is to come” (Gullion 2016: 90), the vignette constructs an affective ethnographic narrative.¹⁶ Consider, for example, how Jackson opens one of his lectures with a remark about his fieldwork in Northern Sierra Leone:

Let me take you back 45 years, to my second night in the Kuranko village of Firawa, when a group of men, women and children gathered on the porch of my newly-recruited field assistant’s house to tell stories. I could not understand a word that was being said, but as Noah summarized each story for me, I was struck by recurring scenarios and motifs. [...] As the days passed into weeks, I began to understand the ramifications of the contrast between village (*sué*) and bush (*fira*) in Kuranko discourse. (2014b: 3)

The vignette gives Jackson a springboard for theoretical reflection:

¹⁴ Originating in the French diminutive of *vigne*, vignette means “small vine”. The term dates back to the 13th century, but its wider application only began around the 1750s, when variations of grapevine tendrils, branches and leaves were applied as decorative elements for period furniture, wall carvings, wine etiquettes and later, in the mid 19th century, also for book illustrations in offset printing. In present times, the term has received a broadened notion and ambit. Today, vignettes pop up as a digital filter choice to blur the edges of our smart phone photos, or are stuck to car windshields, as proof of payment for road charges in Switzerland. They have also found entrance in the world of prose and the social sciences, where they embody short, impressionistic pieces of writing.

¹⁵ Crapanzano has criticized the illustrative use of vignettes with reference to the missing context and the authoritative nature of the guided gaze. See Crapanzano 2004.

¹⁶ In complementary definitions, vignettes are characterized as “personalised accounts of fleeting moments of fieldwork in dramatic form” (John Van Maanen, cited in Humphreys and Watson 2009: 44), or “vivid portrayal[s] of the conduct of an event of everyday life” (Frederick Erickson, cited in Humphreys 2005: 842).

Kuranko stories disclose an existential paradox—that it is only through transgressing the boundaries of custom and convention that a person can tap into the vital sources of life itself, without which society becomes an empty shell and personal existence degenerates into the slavish repetition of what has been decided by others at other times. (ibid.: 4)

As the plot slows down to focus on a particular rather than a general movement, we find a sudden deepening—or, in Geertzian terms, a “thickening”—of description. What is described becomes a significant miniature of a more general picture, as if the particular event had been lifted up and briefly taken out of time. Using an evocative, visual vocabulary, the vignette zooms in on a typical detail of a broader picture. While vignettes depict unique moments, the author should in theory be able to produce a number of additional social situations where the same issue is at stake (Gluckman 1945: 9). By including such narrations into his arguments, Jackson seeks to capture and share specific impressions that he could only ‘make sense of *a posteriori*—in the light of a richer, more general context.¹⁷ In this sense, again, generalization or abstraction should be motivated by a high number of converging particulars.¹⁸

A second way to work anthropologically is by means of comparison. The “comparative method” takes up a prominent yet controversial space in contemporary anthropological research, with numerous anthropologists dedicated to the quest for systematic relationships between two or more phenomena. Following this strand of thinking, Peoples and Bailey proclaim that “no single aspect of human culture can be understood unless its relations to other aspects of the culture are explored” (2000: 8). Comparative intra-cultural and cross-cultural data analysis is a longstanding topic in the social sciences, and central to this second strand of anthropology.¹⁹ While comparative studies may also employ elements of abstraction and generalization, according to Ember, they

¹⁷ The importance of retrospection is reflected in the condition on Participant Observation that it be *long-term*. The research process includes periodic returns to refine one’s theoretical underpinnings as the data collection is in progress, allowing for the possibility of literal re-viewing. This in turn is one of the reasons for the rise of ‘circular’ approaches like grounded theory, which “focuses on participants’ perspectives and provides them with opportunities to articulate their thoughts about issues they consider important, allowing them to reflect on these issues of concern to gain understanding and acquire new insights” (Glaser 1998: 32). Attempting to pin down the form and movement of interpretative ethnographic thought, Schwarz-Shea and Yanow (2012) evoke a hermeneutical vocabulary; they describe a spiral-shaped process in action when anthropologists re-view their fieldwork notes.

¹⁸ Michael Taussig’s ethnographies would be another telling example for this kind of generalization—although Taussig distinguishes the moment of knowledge gain sharply from the reflection on it. “[K]nowing is giving oneself over to a phenomenon rather than thinking about it from above” (Taussig 1992: 10).

¹⁹ The most famous and impactful counterpunch to comparative social studies was Franz Boas’ school of relativist cultural anthropology. Boas, who himself rejected generalization for fear of smoothing over unique particularities of specific cultures, was in favor of tracing back historical reasons for why things and people are the way they are: “[C]ustoms and beliefs themselves are not the ultimate objects of research. We desire to learn the reasons why such customs and beliefs exist—in other words, we wish to discover the history of their development” (Boas 1896: 905). The comparative method, notwithstanding all that has been written in its praise, has been remarkably barren of definitive results” because, according to Boas, it failed to sufficiently incorporate historical development of cultural practices. Boas thereby positioned himself against a growing number of scholars who were implementing comparison to interpret their data.

help us identify both similarities and differences [...]. Even uniqueness employs comparison. We can focus on uniqueness of a culture if we choose, but we can also focus on similarities or differences. Comparison and uniqueness are not incomparable; they are just different ways of looking. (2016: 6)

As they dissect, contrast and compare specific attributes of distinct social entities, comparative social studies, too, operate within the tension of the particular and the general.²⁰

This is not to say that the particular is only taken to have instrumental value in anthropology. Within the last three decades, an increasing number of scholars have dedicated their work to a deeper understanding of the details and unique aspects of human experience. Beginning in the wake of the crisis of representation, in- and outside of anthropology, preferences for abstraction, generalization and comparison outlined above have been criticized extensively. As a prominent example, we may cite Lila Abu-Lughod's powerful plea for "ethnographies of the particular" (1996: 149) in her seminal essay "Writing Against Culture" (ibid.). Abu-Lughod observes that generalization, if taken too far, leads to a failure to acknowledge and evaluate the centrality of meaning to individual human experience. She establishes that this "characteristic mode of operation and style of writing of the social sciences [...] can no longer be regarded as neutral description" (ibid.: 149-150). In a key passage, Abu-Lughod points out that

as anthropologists are in the business of representing others through their ethnographic writing, then surely the degree to which people in the communities they study appear 'other' must also be partly a function of how anthropologists write about them. (ibid: 149)

In line with this, Arthur Kleinman (1997) has argued that when making decisions, humans do not necessarily appeal to some abstract set of rules. Rather, they consider their more immediate, particular situation and the social relationships that are involved in the decision and act accordingly, based on this context. Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998) have argued extensively for this view, too, applying "relational pragmatics" to demonstrate the dynamic interplay of routine, purpose and judgement in explaining human agency.²¹ They,

²⁰ For a recent comparative study of the language and cultures of walking, see Szokolczai and Horvath (2017). For a broad analysis of the comparative method in both the history of and current anthropology, see Candea (2018). For a recent example with in-depth methodological reflection on the significance of comparison for anthropology, see Heer (2019).

²¹ Their detailed, 62 pages strong article analytically disaggregates agency into several component elements, demonstrates ways in which these agentic dimensions interpenetrate with forms of structure, and points out the implications of such a conception of agency for empirical research. Emirbayer and Mische define human agency agency "as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational context of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (1998: 970, original emphasis). Accordingly, agency is a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its

and Kleinman, emphasize that the details of individual situations vary and thus, each enactment of something based on the prescribed set of beliefs will be unique. A vignette, on this account, would try to capture this uniqueness.

At first glance, it seems like Abu-Lughod's proposal threatens to amount to only a collection of inimitable moments and stories, added up next to, or stacked up on top of each other and refusing to be connected on a more abstract level. It seems as if according to this view, a book-length tale about how I went for daily walks with a group of Black women in the townships of Makhanda is an ethnography in its own right. Abu-Lughod addresses this issue in passing:

I also want to make clear what the argument for particularity is not: it is not to be mistaken for arguments for privileging micro over macro processes [...]. Nor need a concern with the particulars of individuals' lives imply disregard for forces and dynamics that are not locally based. On the contrary, the effects of extra-local and long-term processes are only manifested locally and specifically, produced in the actions of individuals living their particular lives, inscribed in their bodies and their words. (1996: 150)

Notice how the message changes in the last sentence (and despite the "On the contrary"). If these extra-local and long-term processes are only manifested locally and specifically—and not, for instance, at least also conceptually—Abu-Lughod's proposal sounds like a preference for micro over macro. Granted, this preference might only qualify as setting up a preferred direction of investigation: micro *before* macro. Nevertheless, one is inclined to ask: What would such an ethnography of the particular look like? Vignettes only? Counted Zanzibar cats after all? Abu-Lughod proposes

that we experiment with narrative ethnographies of the particular in a continuing tradition of fieldwork-based writing [...]. By focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness. (ibid.: 153-154)

A vignette, according to this account, could be a vehicle to transcend the particularity of unique cases. Central to Abu-Lughod's proposal is the claim that simply referring to a fixed, shared canon of generalized cultural beliefs is not sufficient to provide an adequate explanation of human actions and beings. A good vignette must thus avoid evoking stereotypes, leaving room for alternative interpretations.

"iterational" or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a "projective" capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and the present (as a "practical-evaluative" capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). Although mainly analyzed as an everyday pillar of stability that brings order and predictability to everyday actions, Emirbayer and Mische claim that habitual action belongs to the realm of agency since it involves attention and effort, although it is largely unreflective and taken for granted. I will put to work their conception of agency as informed by the past, and thus by habits, in chapter 5.

Ironically, probably the most famous example for one-sided and authoritative use of vignettes is Geertz's own writing on the Balinese cockfight (2004a). His opening vignette leaves little room for alternative interpretation, but facilitates the author with 'proof' for an interpretation on the nature of "the Balinese" he had already, and openly, settled for before crafting the vignette. Identifying the essence of Balinese culture as captured in the cockfight (ibid.: 557), Geertz concludes that in

identifying with his cock, the Balinese man is identifying not just with his ideal self, or even his penis, but also, and at the same time, with what he most fears, hates, and ambivalence being what it is, is fascinated by – 'The Powers of Darkness.' (ibid.: 558)²²

While Geertz's call for thick descriptions was received as a welcome plea for an ethnography based on inductive reasoning and evocative writing, his own vignettes were built to vindicate general claims about an entire culture. The reader is left with a vivid literary impression of a scene that was assigned the revealing power of a paradigmatic event, which contains Geertz's general picture of the Balinese in a nutshell. His "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight", today an anthropological classic, becomes, with an Abu-Lughodan reading, a paradigmatic example of the problems with anthropological generalization.

Overall, the tension between the particular and the general represents a fundamental problem for anthropological methodology. If a particular experience is only valued in its uniqueness, anthropological inquiry amounts to a compilation of anecdotes, lacking the coherence of a unified enterprise. If, alternatively, the particular becomes a springboard for general reflections, few unique incidents will have to account for generalizations on a cultural level. In short, it seems that generalization is crucial, but cannot be methodologically justified.

1.3.2 Context-dependence

Ethnographic representations necessarily are "partial truths".

— Clifford and Marcus (1986: 6)

²² Geertz goes on to claim that the "connection of cocks and cock fighting with such Powers, with the animalistic demons that threaten constantly to invade the small, cleared-off space in which the Balinese have so carefully built their lives and devour its inhabitants, is quite explicit. A cockfight, any cockfight, is in the first instance a blood sacrifice offered, with the appropriate chants and oblations, to the demons in order to pacify their ravenous, cannibal hunger. [...] In the cockfight, man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened animality fuse in a bloody drama of hatred, cruelty, violence, and death. It is little wonder that when, as is the invariable rule, the owner of the winning cock takes the carcass of the loser—often torn limb from limb by its enraged owner—home to eat, he does so with a mixture of social embarrassment, moral satisfaction, aesthetic disgust, and cannibal joy" (ibid.).

Anthropologists can continuously be part of a shared intentional action that contains action sequences within a larger structure spreading over a long period of time. This is what long-term fieldwork is for. Within this temporal horizon, the rules of engagement for that shared intentional action may change; or they may only be given meaning by the writing ethnographer in retrospect. Anthropologists develop their take on past engagement in practices over time, re-interpreting afresh past encounters again and again as new evidence comes to light. There is a genuine instability to the meaning of the interpreted data. As everywhere, content may shift with context.

Getting from an unruly cluster of field experiences to a complete ethnography can be a long and complex procedure of retrospection. Participant Observation, then, must be followed by a layered practice of re-interpretation. While at times we know at the exact moment, as events are unfolding, that they will be vignette-material, at others, we come across almost forgotten diary entries that trigger our memory and creativity in ways that allow us to retrospectively construct them. It is also possible to have a “moment of dislocation”, as Rita Kesselring (2017) calls this associative rupture prompted by new data, in the armchair: Reading other people’s work, be it an ethnography or a theoretical inquiry, can trigger new ways of framing old material.

As evoked in the introduction, anthropology distinguishes itself from neighbor disciplines not necessarily by its content—although that might well be so, too—but by an essential trait of its main method. As Monaghan and Just emphasize, it is qualitative fieldwork that distinguishes anthropology from the rest, “based on the apparently simple idea that in order to understand what people are up to, it is best to observe them by interacting intimately over a longer period of time” (2000: 13).²³ While the social sciences in general have a defining interest in shared action, anthropology in particular prioritizes qualitative over quantitative methods as a means of their interpretation. Participant Observation installs impromptu participation at the heart of anthropological inquiry.

While potential downsides of a qualitative approach are inefficiency and deficient representativeness, Participant Observation allows for an understanding that is non-propositional—that is, that lies beyond the realm of descriptive knowledge—and thus non-quantifiable.²⁴ Unlike interviews—qualitative and quantitative—Participant Observation does not rely on a previously fixed conceptual framework. Rather, long-term Participant Observation will shape and reshape the framework to come. Peter Neumann’s standard introduction to qualitative interviewing has it that in a series of interviews, the first 15 will

²³ One prominent mode of qualitative analysis put forward by sociologist Harald Garfinkel is ethnomethodology, a style of analysis that allows the construction of knowledge brought to bear by our research partners in everyday social life (see Garfinkel 2002 and Barnard and Spencer 1998: 604–8).

²⁴ In addition, extreme situations can be captured better than with interviews. Because an interview cannot take place at the time of a relevant event, but must be *afterwards*, its results will refer to the memories and reconstructions of the interviewees and might thus differ from how things stood for them at the time of the actual event.

reveal a large knowledge gain in comparison to the 15 next interviews, which will add only a limited amount of knowledge (Neumann 2013: 63).

Participant Observation, by contrast, allows for topical accentuations, brought to attention by unique encounters that were deemed relevant in the light of the wider context the researcher has learnt about.²⁵ In this, Participant Observation promises not anecdotal, but testimonial evidence. At the beginning of one's field site exploration, the 'bigger picture' is still unknown. Ethnographers join in actions they do not (yet) understand in the larger context of the new social setting. It might thus be so that what they thought was *X*-ing turns out to be interpreted as *Y*-ing (for example, what was first perceived as a religious ritual might turn into a memory of ordinary kitchen work). My first two weeks in Makhanda, as we will see in chapters 4 and 5, were shaped by impressions I later had to revise, re-place, re-think and re-write.

A related problem emerges between the issue of "going native" and remaining in the position of a researcher. As already mentioned, it is a decisive trait of Participant Observation as Malinowski would have it that it lasts a minimum 12 months, but many long-term studies are compiled of data collected over decades of frequent returns to the same, ever-changing field site. Anthropologists allude to the long duration of fieldwork in another society to justify the value and depth of their claims about the daily routines of the people they study. While it makes intuitive sense that the duration of a stay plays a decisive role in becoming familiar with habits and routines, it remains enigmatic what an appropriate time in the field is, and rather sets an artificial distinction between (too) "short" and (not) "long" (enough).

Another dimension of context is the acknowledgement of social asymmetry. Participation during fieldwork is not essentially different from what transpires in shared intentional actions in everyday life. Building a house together, making breakfast together or walking together are all examples of shared practices anthropologists may focus on as a part of their Participant Observations. The line between friendship and professionalism, between leisure and work, is easily blurred. Researchers may try to be ordinary participants in the daily lives of others, so there is no qualitative distinction to be made between 'having breakfast with an informant' and 'having breakfast with a friend' with regard to the possibility, or the conditions of possibility, for participation. Yet if the aim of fieldwork is to be embedded in the action and context of a social setting, then the additional work of

²⁵ Of course, the graph by Neumann may also apply, at least to some extent, to ethnographic fieldwork, when in hindsight, the anthropologist sees that she continuously built on early findings and later experiences added details to that picture on a more subtle level. My point here is simply that an interview, even if only loosely structured, is still bound to a specific style of interrogation, whereas Participant Observation is not, thus allowing for a bigger variety of experience and interpretation to surface until the very end of an investigation.

ethnographers is to subsequently put their experience into words that are relevant to the scientific community.

Ethnographies evoke partial views. One thing we can mean by this statement is the idea which was induced in the previous section: no piece of ethnographic writing can capture all there is to understand. But the statement can also be read as a critical reminder of whose view it is of a situation: who is choosing the angle, making the cuts and framing the picture. Participant Observation is often conducted in situations informed by social, cultural and economic differences. This has changed over the last decades insofar as an increasing number of anthropologists have done research in their social and/or geographical area of origin. However, it is still more common that ‘the field’ is not ‘home’ and the researcher is not initially (perceived as) a peer. In addition, the larger part of anthropological research is conducted by people from the Global West about people in the Global South. The “first world” investigates the “second” and the “third”, which fosters uneven power relations and entails issues of hierarchy. Being white, being literate, being European: traits in character and looks, heritage and age, gender, race and educational background put the researcher in a certain position, resulting in social settings—and thus research results—infiltrated by asymmetric power relations. What we are likely to encounter in the field is “not simply an experience of difference, but of inequality” (Abu-Lughod 1996: 142). Maintaining that the relationships we entertain with our research partners are innocent of power would, as Abu-Lughod points out, be grossly negligent. In my case—to make an example of an only seemingly unimportant detail—being a female with a completely shaved head in a social environment where hair(care) is a question not only of race, but of social status surely had an impact on my research encounters. One way to put this problem is classically Foucauldian: in the study of human beings, the goals of power and the goals of knowledge cannot be separated.²⁶ Consequently the problem, following Foucault, is that our academic system of knowledge production feeds back into what we think is true, which in turn reshapes our research focus. In knowing one controls and in controlling one knows. Power relations are present in any social situation. In anthropology, however, they have to be made explicit in order to properly interpret the data collected through Participant Observation. This raises the problem of how a shared intentional action can emerge despite the often enormous cultural and social inequalities between the participants, as well as the lack of knowledge about everyday practices on the part of the researcher.

This is at least partially a problem of representation. When we think that we have found something worth writing about, how should we do it? This was the main concern of

²⁶ This point is linked to a larger debate on authority, knowledge production and the sociology of knowledge in general. Foucault calls this intertwinement “power/knowledge”, since it combines into a unified whole “the deployment of force and the establishment of truth” (Foucault 1975: 184).

the crisis of representation, which took center stage between the 1980s and 1990s, challenging the idea of an objective way of writing anthropologically (see most prominently Clifford and Marcus 1986). As Udi Mandel Butler writes, these “critiques challenged the possibility of ‘neutral’ representations of culture, and pointed to the necessarily constructed and partial nature of anthropological knowledge and to the various rhetorical devices by which ethnographic texts project their authority” (2009: 22). Yet, as he goes on to claim, “despite the arguments and aspirations for a ‘multi-vocal’ ethnography which the debates from the 1980s and 1990s put forward, such calls have tended to be theoretical with few examples of successful attempts of ‘multi-vocality’ being produced” (ibid.). The problem, according to Butler, is the failure to acknowledge the asymmetry of interest and power: “[H]owever much we replace the monologue with dialogue, the discourse will always remain asymmetrical, for the purpose of ethnography ‘is to speak *about* something for somebody; it implies contextualisation and reframing” (ibid., inner quotes from Hastrup 1992: 122). The anthropologist dominates the text.

There is yet another, perhaps less obvious factor that can render an anthropologist’s social relationships asymmetric. Anthropologists are researchers, who intend to publish articles or books about what they encounter. If they are open about this fact (which for ethical reasons they should be), they may well be perceived as interlopers—and with good reason.²⁷ Nancy Sharper-Hughes argues that “anthropology is by nature intrusive, entailing a certain amount of symbolic and interpretive violence to the ‘native’ peoples’ own intuitive, though still partial, understanding of their part of the world” (2000: 120). Jackson, responding to Sharper-Huges, is more optimistic. “What gives anthropological writing its unique character,” he tells us, “is its interleaving of these very different modes of being-with-others—relating to the other as a fellow subject (a friend) and relating to the other as an object of intellectual interest (a stranger)” (Jackson 2012: 8).²⁸ Yet the gap remains. Consider Förster’s example of an initiation rite in northern Côte d’Ivoire, where teenage boys, according to local tradition, get eaten by a panther in a grove and are then spat out again as men (1997: 304-313). This initiation is essentially shaped by the main intentions of their participants: to become men, and thus full members of society. Förster himself was prompted to participate in this ritual, and did share many of the (bodily) experiences with the rest of the males. But while everyone else’s main goal was to follow the ritual in order to be initiated, and thus complete another step of their communal life, Förster’s main goal

²⁷ Alternatively, should an anthropologist choose to work undercover in order to get insights they would not be able to elicit otherwise, the setting becomes asymmetric in a new and perhaps more disturbing way, for it is then built on deception.

²⁸ It is also possible for anthropologists to interrupt or intentionally ‘act out’ on purpose in order to get a telling reaction though this interruption of flow. Thanks to Titus Stahl for pointing out this option to me.

was necessarily different. He could not be guided by the context of a life his research partners were fully immersed in.²⁹

Anthropologists *as anthropologists* take the knowledge generated through participation to have at least also an instrumental, never just an intrinsic value. Therefore, even if most intentions throughout a period of participation intersect, they will never be equivalent. In comparison with leisure activities that turn into memory, ethnographically motivated activities are, additionally, labelled as *data*. The problem of a potentially insufficient overlap between intentions, like the problem of representation, gives rise to social asymmetries and their inherent power imbalances.

To sum up, let us consider the connection that exists between the broader problem of context and the sub-problem of social asymmetry. If certain participatory acts can only be properly understood in retrospect, framed in a wider context, then the problem of context consists in knowing where to stop. Recalling past situations in the field generates meaning that might differ essentially from the instant interpretation of a moment at its time of occurrence. When is the context wide enough? Have we immersed ourselves sufficiently? How can we know that? But in the light of the problems deriving from social asymmetry, we can also ask: Whose context anyway? Could we *ever* give the requisite context required to understand another person's mode of life? These are the sort of questions that signify the importance, but at the same time the challenges of gaining contextual knowledge.

1.3.3 Non-propositional knowledge

Our research partners may have never put into words what we are eager to write down. While they have, at some point, paid attention to what they now do effortlessly and automatically—they have *learnt* it—their focus might have long shifted away from what we pay close attention to. In the field, rather than explaining to us what we want to know, our research partners exhibit the knowledge necessary for the action *in the action*. It is this kind of knowledge I call *non-propositional*. Not all practical knowledge is non-propositional, but all non-propositional knowledge is practical. It is knowledge that pertains to doing things. Where propositional knowledge is must be linguistically communicable, non-propositional knowledge, although it may also be communicable, does not have its possible articulation as a necessary condition.

I distinguish two kinds of non-propositional knowledge. The first kind is procedural in that it is knowledge of how to do things. Such knowledge includes knowing how to tie

²⁹ Förster's own theoretical focus with this example was not the difference in intention, but the possibility of sameness of experience. Note that my claim is not that Förster lacked the intention to be initiated. Rather, my point is that the ritual itself evokes intentions connected to local, overarching life goals only to those who live according to these goals. The detailed description of the rite can be found in Förster 1997: 295–328.

shoelaces or dance the polka. The second kind essentially depends on sensory experience in that it can only be gained through first hand practice. Such knowledge includes the knowledge of what it is like to smell strawberries, to see the color blue or to reach a mountain's peak after a day of hiking.

In reality, each practice incorporates a fusion of the two, and also intersects with practical, propositional knowledge and theoretical knowledge. When I go for a hike, my knowledge of the terrain intersects with my knowledge of how to tie my shoes and my knowledge of what pleasant weather for a walk feels like.

One of the primary motivations behind the method of Participant Observation is to harness non-propositional knowledge through the creation of intimate social spaces that only become intelligible when one participates in them over a longer period of time. The continuance of participation ensures coherence with the broader social context, thus yielding justification. Förster (2022) states that this kind of “participation is needed whenever ethnographers approach the habitual and non-predicative dimension of social life” because it enables anthropologists to capture “the unwritten and unsaid, hidden transcripts, the underneath of things and the many discreet forms that may exist wherever anthropologists share social life with others” (ibid.). Indeed, successive participation may be the only way to gain knowledge of the subtle webs of sociality, notably those exhibited through habitualized activity, or in trauma. Let me elaborate on both.

What are habits? Are they a result of, or do they make us who we are? Elaborating on the subject of agency, John Dewey found that “every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences. For it is a somewhat different person who enters into them” (2015: 35). On the one hand, habits seem to “make us” do things, and thus shape our acting. On the other hand, we may choose to do certain things repeatedly, thus producing and shaping habits actively. The sharp distinction between active agency and passive suffering is dissolved into a continuous circle of undergoing and enactment. We are what we repeatedly do. Elaborating on habits of attention, Ingold suggests that the part of habits that shape our identities must be seen as a manner of becoming, not of being: “The ‘I’ of habit [...] falls in the slipstream of action” (Ingold 2018a: 24). Habits, then, are the manifestations of a continuous carving out of who we are about to become. I will return to this point in more detail shortly. For now, suffice to say that much of our everyday life is habitual, and the challenge of Participant Observation is to find a balance between immersion and paying attention.³⁰ Kristin Surak, exploring the tension between routine and rupture, points out that we “take much for granted in the flow of a situation. Moving

³⁰ That is not to say that habits always weaken or inhibit our ability to articulate what we do. They can also lead to a refined articulation, as for instance in martial arts, where a master learns and teaches awareness of certain motion sequences. Also, craftsmanship, as Richard Sennett makes explicit (2008), can foster refined articulation of trained, habitual movement.

into a new social world, however, disrupts many of the assumed and automatic ways of being to which we are accustomed” (2017: 324). Supposedly, this rupture is what makes us pay attention to what otherwise would “go largely under the experiential radar” (ibid.: 313). The epistemological position of the anthropologist at the beginning of her empirical research period is, in this respect, advantageous: She will notice what might have slipped into the habitual, non-propositional realm of local actors. The link between habits and non-propositional knowledge should be clear: The more habitual our interactions become, the less we consciously think and talk about them in propositional form. Why should we? The function of routine is precisely to enable us to think about and tend to other things than sitting, walking, or driving.³¹ We might be well able to report on request what it is we are doing, but we are likely to encounter difficulties when asked to describe how we move—for instance our fingers to tie shoelaces or our upper bodies to dance the polka. Not because it is an impossible task to explain in propositional form, but because we lack practice in doing so. Parents might (re-)learn how to explain the tying of shoelaces, but more likely, they will kneel down and let their children watch, who gradually, through observation and practice, will learn how to do it themselves. Surak stresses the importance of this capacity to withdraw from awareness of everyday tasks like checking out at the supermarket or showering (ibid.), for it lets us shift awareness to matters that are more extraordinary, demanding our full attention. Evoking Alfred Schütz’s notion of *natürliche Einstellung* (Schütz and Luckmann 1973, quoted in Surak 2017: 313), she explains that in the habitual act, “our bodies do not leave us entirely, but shift into the background—they are [...] present and unnoticed” (ibid: 313).

Now, let me return to Ingold’s picture of the “I” falling into the slipstream of action. Understood in the sense that we are what we repeatedly do, human habits appear a crucial aspect to incorporate in anthropological fieldwork yet at the same time beyond recognition once acquired. To make matters more difficult, let me mention a psychological phenomenon, which, in honor of the following poem, has been called the *centipede effect*.

A centipede was happy—quite!
Until a toad in fun
Said, "Pray, which leg comes after which?"
Which threw her mind in such a pitch,
She laid bewildered in the ditch
Considering how to run.³²

³¹ Surak also points out that if we lose our ability to perform tasks habitually, we must find mitigation techniques “or life becomes so overloaded with conscious effort that burnout results” (2017: 313).

³² Attributed to various authors, most commonly to Katherine Craste: 1871.

Habits automatize tasks to reduce attentive efforts, but come at the cost of the centipede effect, where attention impairs the ability to do that task—much like the centipede tripping on its own legs. As Ingold reassures himself as he prepares for a hike, “walking is just a habit; it is sedimented in my body and I can do it more or less without thinking” (2018a: 23). But what if our task is to think about, and put into words, what it is for a specific group or individual to walk? The challenge of conveying non-propositional knowledge explained through the role of habit, then, can be framed as the need for attentiveness to what has its natural place in the unheeded.

A second area in which non-propositional knowledge plays a critical role is in cultural experiences of trauma. In cases of trauma, the reasons for not being verbal about one’s experiences are not (merely) epistemic. Amongst people who have suffered from any form of violence, for example, we can observe what Martin Kusch (2017) calls “linguistic despair” arising when such people try to put their horrendous experiences into words. Kusch quotes the following testimonies from Elie Wiesel’s *A Jew Today* (1978) and from Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* (1993):

Their sentences are terse, sharp, etched into stone. Every word contains a hundred, and the silence between the words strikes us as hard as the words themselves. They wrote not with words, but against them. They tried to communicate their experiences of the Holocaust, but all they communicated was their feeling of helplessness at not being able to communicate the experience. (Wiesel 1978: 198, quoted in Kusch 2017: 145)

Just as our hunger [in the concentration camp] cannot be compared with the hunger of someone who has skipped a meal, so also our way of freezing calls for another name. We [today] say ‘hunger’ and ‘pain’ and ‘winter’. But all these are different phenomena [from those experienced in the camp]. Our words today are free words, used by free human beings, beings who experience joy and sorrow in their home. (Levi 1993: 123, quoted in Kusch 2017: 150)

The words we use to describe ordinary tasks in the course of our ordinary lives may prove completely inadequate to capture the experiences of extraordinary suffering. Someone who has regularly suffered hunger over a long period of time might not be able to communicate this feeling through the concept of hunger to someone who uses the phrase “I’m hungry”. (Or, as it has become normal to say in my overall well-nourished circle of friends to indicate that their last full meal was four hours ago: “I’m starving”).³³ Yet a vocabulary to capture

³³ When hunger changes into a feeling that is connected with the everyday for a whole community, the term can be reshaped within that specific community (in this case, Holocaust survivors). In line with this, a philosophical attempt to explore the psychoanalytic dimension of the (in)ability to talk has been made by Joachim Küchenhoff (2019), who

such extraordinary experiences? may not be available, or it might be convoluted with meaning ascribed by, in Levi's terms, "free human beings". I label this issue "the problem of conceptual convergence", thereby meaning the problem of conversing with research partners who use seemingly clear concepts (like "hunger" or "walking together") with different extensions than we do. Thus, even if the practical knowledge the anthropologist is interested in happens to be propositional, and articulated, it might alter significantly in content, depending on who says, hears, or reads it. Alternatively, context-sensitivity of the semantics of words like "hunger" or "winter" can interlace with the non-propositional realm of their possible extension. In effect, some extraordinary experience, as pointed out in the first of the above quotes, might find expression without explicit articulation, in silence or verbal struggle, for instance in the form of pauses, negations or discontinued sentences.

The apparent impossibility to communicate can coincide with a further issue concerning the importance of non-propositional knowledge, namely the lack of a discursive formation from which to draw. In a society where sexual violence, for instance, is neither sanctioned nor seen as something to claim injury for, one cannot draw from a vocabulary of injury. The prevailing legal system can help or undermine the construction of such a vocabulary. Using an example close to home: Until 1992, rape in Swiss law was defined as necessarily extramarital. In effect, there was no public discourse about or conception of rape in marriage, and it was thus harder to make explicit propositional knowledge claims about non-consensual sex with a spouse. Veena Das' example for non-propositional knowledge is structurally silenced pain: "In the memory of an event as it is organised 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" (1995: 175–176). In an authoritarian system, fear of sanction might be added.

On a lighter note, returning to the first reason for knowledge to be unarticulated, walking or blowing one's nose usually also forms part of our non-propositional knowledge. In such cases, the reason is not societal circumstances, but the nature of habitus itself.

The challenge of how to convey and account for non-propositional knowledge has been debated with the sub-disciplinary label *anthropology of the body*. While usually not discussed under the heading of non-propositional knowledge, the significance of bodily experience for Participant Observation is obvious. The often-hidden pretext of Participant Observation is that bodily participation (dancing, chanting, crafting together) is the key to knowledge about such practices, providing a sufficient basis to write about them in a scientifically relevant manner. Yet the debate is often unclear on what exactly is gained. Are we, by means of participation, claiming to have gained knowledge about the bodily

confirms that trauma can be a forceful gatekeeper of predication, and verbally connecting with others who went through similar experiences can be a way of breaking the silence.

experience *of others*? Or do we participate to then report on our own experiences that we seek to compare and contrast with our Participant Observations of our dancing, chanting or crafting partners?

The discursive position of the body poses a deep problem inherent in Participant Observation. It therefore appears somewhat surprising that the body, a central category of being human, only became a nominal focus of anthropological study in the late 1970s. When Pierre Bourdieu introduced his eminent *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), bodily dispositions of the habitus became the beating heart of what soon grew into a fully fleshed subfield: the anthropology of the body. It took another decade to seep into the collective memory of the discipline that nearly four decades earlier, during the interwar period, Marcel Mauss, a young nephew of Émile Durkheim, had already begun to work on a traverse between sociology and anthropology. He had thereby relaunched the Aristotelian term *habitus* as a key concept for a deeper understanding of what he labelled “*les techniques du corps*” (1934). Mauss sharply distinguished his notion of habitus from an individualistic conception of habit, placing the former in the realm of bodily education and, thus, of the social. Accordingly, our bodily activities, such as walking, swimming or eating, are largely shaped and determined by sociocultural processes of education and imitation. Suggesting a triad of biological, psychological and sociological insights merging into habitus, Mauss left behind his uncle’s deep aversion to psychology factoring in sociological studies. Simultaneously, by framing habitus as socially constructed, he firmly planted Durkheim’s theory of collective representation as a *sui generis* phenomenon, ready to grow in emerging discourses around and of the body.

When Bourdieu took up the notion of habitus some thirty years later, he sparked a far-reaching debate around the body as a culturally and historically contingent category, a material locus of practice, and a mediator of knowledge. How does our social world shape our bodies, literally and conceptually? How do anthropologists position themselves and others in a scientific discourse that is at least partially dependent on knowledge production through bodily participation? These and related questions began to form the rapidly growing field of the anthropology of the body. Since then, a number of scholars have taken up the notion of *habitus* and bodily knowledge.

In his award-winning essay “Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology” (1990), Thomas Csordas draws on Bourdieu’s idea of habitus to emphasize the taken-for-granted nature of one’s everyday encounters and engagement with the world, and argues that it is both an expression and a development of cultural ways of being. Using the example of glossolalia, Csordas seeks to demonstrate how religious objects like demons and spirits are culturally constituted through specific religious, bodily rituals, where they coincide with bodily states that for his research partners seem to be “outside their control” (Csordas 1990: 14). Csordas reestablished the premise into the scholarly discourse on the body that what

people feel and think is best explained through the anthropological lens of social construction. The body becomes the subject (rather than the object) of culture, or, as Csordas formulates it, as the “existential ground of culture” (1990: 5). Speaking in tongues, then, is not an act of god, but a bodily expression of a culturally grown phenomenon. Anthropologists of the body can tease out what “really” happens by connecting bodily behavior to the wider context of one’s cultural and social history.³⁴

Michael Jackson’s (1989, 1996, 2002) writings on the Kuranko in Sierra Leone before and after the civil war, as well as the works on spirit possession by Janice Boddy (1989), Michael Lambek (1993), Paul Stoller (1994), and many others, mark the beginning of integrating the body more self-evidently into ethnographies. Unlike older writings on possession, these ethnographies include reflections not only about, but also *through* the body. The body is no longer seen as something merely representational, but as part and parcel of the experience of trance, transition, and possession. Albeit with differing theoretical approaches, ranging from what Unni Wikan calls “experience-near anthropology” (1991) to the “ethnography of experience” (1991) deployed by medical anthropologists’ Joan and Arthur Kleinman, this body of scholarship establishes the premise that the self, and culture, are grounded in the *lived* experience of being (in) a body.³⁵

In the anthropology of the body I observe the problematic tendency of much research to prematurely draw on phenomenological approaches, thereby giving preference to “the body” on a theoretical level, but not on an empirical one.

In the past thirty years, anthropological and philosophical theories and methodologies addressing the acquisition of bodily knowledge through participation have been repeatedly scrutinized, challenged and refined in various ways. In this context, a body-conscious social scientific scholarship has made significant strides. Phenomenological anthropologists have contributed prominently to this body of literature “by grounding their theorising, description, and analysis in close examination of concrete bodily experiences, forms of knowledge, and practice” (Desjarlais and Throop 2011: 90) and have thereby “worked to introduce more fully the historical, the cultural, the variable, and the relative into phenomenology” (ibid.: 92).³⁶ Nevertheless, I identify two major shortcomings in the debate.

The first one can be portrayed as a series of *lacunas*, represented by a number of inchoate buzzwords that are time and again frequented to explain (away) the complexities of bodily knowledge, while being themselves epistemological dark spots in plain sight.

³⁴ While there would be much to say about the problems of interpretative dominance in this account, my point here is just that Csordas’ work was a corner stone for anthropology about the body. See also Csordas 1993 and 2008.

³⁵ As Kesselring (2017: 167–186) argues, the effects of discourses on lived experience are unpredictable and can only be understood through empirical research.

³⁶ See also Desjarlais and Throop (2011: 97) for a comprehensive list of key contributions to critical and refining reflections on phenomenological approaches within anthropology.

Despite the consensus among anthropologists that bodily knowledge shapes our being-in-the-world, and thus our inner and outer movements, the scholarly community is still looking for “alternative modes to those inscriptive and constructivist discourses that currently dominate the humanities and social sciences [...] where the body is of interest only in its reflection through discourse, its constitution in representation, or its mediation by images” (Grosz, 2004: 3). Much of this search invests into new terms and modes of description. Out of this arises a series of technical terms whose contents often remain ambiguous. Bodily knowledge is circumscribed with a number of predicates such as “inscribed” or “sedimented”, “habitualized” or “habitual”, “unconscious”, “nonpredicative” or “non-propositional”, “hidden” or “tacit”, “class-specific”, “gender-related” or “culturally determined”, thus covering a range of theoretical perspectives. This variety of terms is evidence of a search for clarity, but its sheer number contributes to a further blurring of what anthropologists—individually and as part of a scientific community—mean. One by one, the growing number of these conceptual lacunas adds further gaps to the theoretical and methodological discourse around bodily knowledge. I will offer first cues as to where a fruitful development of these conceptual offshoots sprouting from the semantic field of shared bodily knowledge could lead in the next chapter.

The second problem I identify within the anthropological debate on the body is an unsustainable theoretical *shortcut*, allowing unexamined presumptions from the phenomenological tradition, most notably of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to abbreviate basic discussions about the conditions under which bodily knowledge is gained and shared. Rather than exploring conditions under which shared bodily knowledge arises, anthropologists seem to have accepted the truism that it does at some times and not at others. With that, the *methodological* question of what is required to produce shared knowledge has been bracketed, omitted, or left to theory alone. Subsequently, anthropology has somewhat conveniently relied on phenomenology as a theoretical and analytical scaffold to explain the functions and capacities of the sentient body, but also human agency, intersubjectivity and intentions. In effect, the literature on the anthropology of the body is interspersed with phenomenology (see Desjarlais and Throop 2011). Although strictly speaking not a theory, but a bundle of methods, phenomenological approaches may well help to elucidate what it is, in principle, to experience a phenomenon, and what role intentionality and intersubjectivity play for bodily knowledge gain specifically and for human agency generally. On the face of it, thus, phenomenology seems like the perfect candidate to illuminate the domain of the body as a domain of practical knowledge gain. Michael Jackson (1996) has made the basic and crucial point that while the notion of phenomenology covers a wide range of anthropological approaches, it captures the shared concern with a world that is not simply constructed, but, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, *preobjectively* experienced. This point is theoretically

valuable, but remains methodologically murky. What has been brushed aside—or, embracing the idea of a shortcut: sidestepped—is a crucial concern of anthropological inquiry: What does this mean for our actual, concrete endeavors in the field? Let me try to disclose the problem with phenomenology for anthropological methodology by following Csordas' argumentation in his already mentioned, extensively quoted “Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology” (1990). Csordas develops an approach to embodiment that considers the body as the subject (rather than the object) of culture, or, as he formulates it, as the “existential ground of culture” (ibid.: 5). He extends Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception with Bourdieu, both of whom collapse the subject-object distinction in their concepts of the “preobjective” and “habitus”, respectively. Following Merleau-Ponty, Csordas suggests studying how something becomes an object; “our perception ends in objects”, but it starts with the preobjective, which is bodily yet preabstract.

Csordas summarizes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as a thorough critique of empiricism and intellectualism, its main point of attack being empiricism's constancy hypothesis. Csordas agrees with Merleau-Ponty that the trouble with that is the assumption that there is a “point by point correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and elementary perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 7, quoted in Csordas 1990: 8). In other words, empiricists have falsely asserted a type of correspondence theory of truth, implying that because human perception reacts to external, worldly stimuli, our beliefs and statements are true only insofar as they correspond to actual state of affairs. In effect, abstraction has falsely been deemed the primary mode of understanding. Merleau-Ponty's own example is the geometrical form of a triangle (1962: 383-384). Perception itself, as the phenomenologist project wants to have it, allows us to see a triangle. Empiricism, by contrast, claims that what we *really* see is a set of lines in a specific proportion and order. The phenomenologist's point is that this would already be an act of abstraction.³⁷ What empiricism has missed is that such objects—in this case: three lines constituting the triangle—are not a primary, but “secondary product of reflective thinking” (1988: 9). Empiricism, according to Merleau-Ponty, wanted to have it the other way around, and must be stood from head to its feet. What Merleau-Ponty has thus offered, and what makes the phenomenological project valuable is the insight that empiricism does not actually endorse a methodological grounding of empirical knowledge in perception. In Csordas' words, “[t]here is always more than meets the eye, and perception can never outrun itself or exhaust the possibilities of what it perceives” (1988: 8). The phenomenological enterprise, according to Csordas, takes seriously that very fact. Addressing the worry that such a conception of preobjective perception would imply “that embodied existence is outside or

³⁷ This argument runs parallel to what Kesselring (2017: 204-205) has pointed out about the Foucauldian fallacy of one-sided discourse: Inscription is already an abstraction.

prior to culture” (1990: 9), Csordas points out another asset of phenomenology for anthropological inquiry: It is “a descriptive science of existential beginnings, not of already constituted cultural products” (1990: 9). Hence, taking immediateness of perception as an epistemological starting point for anthropological inquiry does not result in a notion of precultural or presocial understanding of others, but merely in it being *preabstract*.

As already mentioned, not only Csordas, but also other prominent scholars like Jackson (1998, 2005, 2012), according to whom “Kuranko would readily assent to Merleau-Ponty” (2014a: 453), have used phenomenology as an explanatory force for specific empirical data from the field, when what it offers is really a fundamental insight about the quality of human perception. The problem for anthropological inquiry is this: as soon as we work with the valuable observation about the immediateness of experience, we theorize and make it impossible to follow it. By then, we have already shifted into the mode of theorization, having dropped out of the mode in which we can be immersed.³⁸ Merleau-Ponty’s critique on empiricism has to be critically revisited in its forms of application in anthropology: by taking it as a theoretical and methodological fundament to detangle empirical data, we do exactly what phenomenology set out to move away from: we put abstraction before immediate perception.

Let us consider one more example of how phenomenological approaches are employed in detail, this time from a Husserlian standpoint: Alessandro Duranti begins his book *The Anthropology of Intentions* (2015) by declaring that both disciplines, anthropology and philosophy, have overstated their case concerning the place and relevance of intentions for human agency. While a whole generation of philosophers of action, according to Duranti, claims intentions to be fundamental for an understanding of both solitary and joint action, anthropologists time and again point out that intentions are a specifically Western ingredient in (the conception of) agency and do not matter for some societies, where people have been said to exclusively focus on the outcome of their actions. Duranti seeks to demonstrate that intentions do not *necessarily* play as central a role in a thorough explanation of shared human agency as some philosophers want to have it. At the same time, however, intentions *possibly* matter even in societies “where people have been said to avoid reading the minds of others” (2015: 1).³⁹ With empirical data from three decades, and borrowing from Husserl, Duranti proposes an “intentional continuum” (2015:

³⁸ Jackson’s (2014a) response to this is existentialist: Following Sartre, human experience is always moving back and forth between alienation and immersion. Jackson develops a concept of fieldwork as a constant dialectic between near and far. Accordingly, the “human consciousness oscillates between moments of complete absorption in an immediate situation and moments of detachment—when we stand back and take stock of what we are doing, how we are doing it, and why” (ibid.: 27).

³⁹ While at first glance, this does not seem to be an issue for anthropology of the body, such dominant accounts of the role and importance of intentions directly affect an understanding of the body in the sense that intentions are a key to explain intentional bodily action, practical knowledge and the possibility of it being shared. Following either strand of thought has fundamental implications for an anthropology of the body that wants to understand the emergence of shared bodily knowledge in participation, for it has to place and name the human capacity to bodily learn, understand, and know.

233), which, in a nutshell, encompasses the idea that there are variations in degrees of intentional awareness across both solitary and collective intentional action. Duranti then moves to criticism of John Searle's speech act theory. Searle, himself arguably in favor of a clear-cut argument rather than getting into the messiness of fieldwork scenarios, fostered "a preference of simplification over complexification" and a "professed dislike of ambiguity" (Duranti, 2015: 4). Duranti's alternative proposal is to draw from Husserl's conception of the above mentioned "intentional continuum" and of intersubjectivity, thus giving clear preference to a phenomenological view of the role of mental states like intentions.

While offering detailed criticism of Searle, Duranti's book does not convincingly prove how a phenomenological approach is an improvement on analytic action theory of Searle's brand. As Eve Danziger observes, Duranti's suggestion to "take Husserl's ideas as the platform for all understanding of human interaction everywhere is not subjected by Duranti to the same empirical scrutiny with which he treats Searle" (2017: 452). Cross-cultural variability in attitudes to others' mental states is not more clearly elaborated on in Husserl's use of intentions and intentionality. Also, there is a set of preconditions one must subscribe to in order to follow this alternative path: According to Husserl, intersubjective knowledge is both temporally and logically *prior* to self-knowledge. One knows oneself *in virtue of* knowing "the Other". Danziger thus asks: "[T]o what extent and in which of many possible senses does intersubjective knowledge empirically 'precede' other kinds of knowledge?" (ibid.). Duranti does not elaborate on this matter, but takes Husserl's insistence on the temporal priority of the social as given.⁴⁰

Seeing the whole extent of this third and last challenge, we can summarize a set of problems and a problematic solution. Csordas and Duranti deliver just two of many examples of the employment of phenomenological theory without methodological guidance of how to employ the theory in anthropological practice. The problematic solution takes the form of an overemphasis and somewhat uncritical reliance on phenomenology as it is mostly endorsed by the anthropology of the body. The underlying set of problems remains: Despite the promise participation offers in providing access to non-propositionally encoded forms of cultural knowledge, it remains unclear how the empirical data gathered through Participant Observation—that is the part of it that represents non-propositional knowledge—can be put into words. The issue is twofold. We cannot simply ask and note down our research partners' explanations. At the same time, we have to be careful not to get so immersed as to submerge the precious knowledge that is the fabric of our ethnographies by giving into the force of habit ourselves. The challenge of Participant

⁴⁰ At the same time, phenomenology is concerned with the first-person point of view in the sense that "the Other" helps the "I" to re-cognise itself. The presupposition Duranti endorses is thus only a steppingstone to get to a conceptual constitution of the "I". How exactly we get from this to a "We" remains notoriously murky. The problem will be discussed in chapter 2.

Observation is to access this kind of at times habitual, and often non-propositional, non-quantifiable knowledge embodied in practices and customs and to find an intelligible way to communicate it, all while in the slipstream of participation.

1.3.4 The relationship between the three challenges

So far, I have discussed three problems arising for Participant Observation as though they were conceptually distinct from one another. In reality, they are intimately connected.

Consider the observation that the data which participation produces also produces a tension between the general and the particular. This raises the question how anthropology should process its empirical findings. Should we generalize and abstract, compare, or leave it as is? Or does it all depend on what it is we focus on? Part of the answer to these questions lies in the framework we choose for our work, and thus the context we see our research in. In this sense, the tension between the particular and the general and the problem of context are closely intertwined; the one cannot be resolved unless we have also gone some way to resolving the other.

Or again, consider the connection that exists between the problem of context and the problem of non-propositional knowledge. In order to properly interpret a person's silence—for instance, to see it as a sign of trauma rather than a sign of habit—we need to familiarize ourselves with the cultural, historical and individual background of our research partners, and interpret in accordance with this context.

Now from this could follow that the link between the three problems is itself merely context-bound, and thus arbitrary. Against this, I will suggest that the three problems can be seen as three connecting dots of a triangle that marks the border of the discipline that is anthropology. From each dot we can look inwards and get a perspective view onto possible answers to the question Geertz thought nobody could really answer: What is anthropology? To a significant degree, I suggest it is the grappling with the challenges discussed above.

1.4 Conclusion

The first part of this chapter laid out the history and significance of Participant Observation for anthropology. The second part turned to three challenges for Participant Observation:

1. The tension between the particular and the general
2. Context-dependence of action perception
3. Non-propositional knowledge and conceptual convergence

The first challenge is not directly related to the question of what participation is. It is concerned with an implication of the method *Participant Observation*: The tension between the particular and the general shows itself, on the one hand, in anthropology's predisposition to take potential anecdotal evidence for testimonial evidence, and to induce from a series of unique encounters to more general claims. On the other hand, general assumptions about functions of culture predetermine ways of interpreting specific social practices. I will return to the tension between the particular and the general when I discuss walking together as a paradigm example for a shared action in chapter 3.

The second and third challenge are directly related to the question of what participation is in the sense that context-dependence and non-propositional knowledge play key roles in actual participation in the field: Context matters to determine the content of a shared action; we need to have some knowledge of the circumstances under which a shared action comes into being in order to understand its meaning in a specific social setting. Non-propositional knowledge is the form the gained knowledge might take as we participate. Conceptual convergence, which was also discussed under the subheading of context, can be a precondition for an action to count as shared according to a given theory. As I seek to show in the next chapter, philosophical theories on participation—or, in the vocabulary of action theory: shared action—can speak to those problems because they seek to conceptualize shared action in a way that gives both the value of context and of non-propositional knowledge a co-determining place in its conception.

I have shown how phenomenological approaches have gained dominance in the anthropology of the body, taking the role of philosophical, theoretical frameworks for the interpretation of anthropologists' empirical findings. I have critically examined this tendency to employ phenomenology as a theoretical scaffold and shown how it allows the epistemological problems Participant Observation offers to remain unexamined. Rather than illuminating the dark spots in the epistemology of participatory fieldwork, phenomenological approaches in anthropology take for granted Participant Observation as a method that just works.

Philosophy of action is different from phenomenology in that it calls into question the fundament of shared action, perception, knowledge and intention. It is for this reason that I will focus on this strand of philosophy rather than examining phenomenological theory.

We are about to cross the intersection of Participant Observation and philosophy of action. The discussion in this chapter is primarily expository, preparing the way for a positive reshaping of anthropology's main method in the next chapter, where I will argue that participation can be fruitfully understood as the shift from a solitary to a joint intentional action. Framing these problems afresh, with the concepts of shared action and

collective intentionality, will emerge as a new possibility for outlining participation in a helpful way.

Chapter 2

Participation in Social Philosophy

“Only you can know if you had that intention.” One might tell someone this when one was explaining the meaning of the word “intention” to him. For then it means: that is how we use it.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, PI: §247

2.1 Introduction

We have seen how Participant Observation, the distinctive methodology which guides much anthropological research, invites a host of difficult questions concerning its suitability to achieve the ends to which it is applied. We may identify, as a unifying thread that underlies and connects these questions, a conceptual problem about *what participation is*. The challenge of context-dependence, for example, presupposes that context matters to determine the content of a shared action—leading us to ask how much context must be incorporated in order to claim that one has ever truly participated in the lives of their subjects. Here, conceptual guidelines can help to develop standards on what counts as participation, and what does not. The challenge of non-propositional knowledge, in turn, arises because the form of much of the knowledge gained through participation is non-linguistic and body-centered—leading to questions about how this type of knowledge can be transmitted to an academic audience who has not participated. Here, conceptual analysis of ‘participation’ can help us see how non-propositional knowledge co-constitutes participation, thus shedding light on the significance and quality of this type of knowledge for its ethnographic transmission.

The first challenge for Participant Observation I have discussed—the tension between the particular and the general—does not directly engage questions about the concept of participation, but may be seen to rest on the outcome of conceptual investigations. It motivates the question how we can abstract from unique encounters to more general claims, and vice versa, and is not directly related to the question of what participation *is*. Rather it is concerned with an implication of the method. Nevertheless, the question of how to navigate between unique encounters and their abstract interpretations can be sensibly framed only after we have treated the conceptual question about what participation *is*. Taken together, these observations suggest that an important first step for

making progress in resolving the practical issues concerning anthropological methodology is to more closely examine the concept of participation on which that methodology is based.

Questions about the nature of participation—as well as about perception, practical knowledge and the possibility of it being shared—are by definition philosophical questions. Indeed, in the same way that participation as a methodology helps to define the discipline of anthropology, the methodology of conceptual analysis helps to define the discipline of philosophy. In moving from a set of practical questions about participation (*What can we learn about human forms of life through participation?*) to questions that address the concepts presupposed by those practical questions (*What is it to participate? What are the conditions that must be met for participation—or, in the vocabulary of action theory, ‘shared action’—to be obtained?*), we take a distinct step away from anthropology and towards philosophy. Questions about the nature of participation have a long tradition of philosophical thought behind them, being fundamental to the work of such leading philosophical figures as Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein. Within contemporary analytic philosophy, meanwhile, the rivalry between different theories of shared action have direct implications for the very questions that arise in the course of understanding Participant Observation. For in each view, the value of context, of non-propositional knowledge and so forth plays different roles in co-determining what (according to each view) is and is not participation.

An immediate implication of these observations is to suggest that the project of understanding anthropological methodology stands in an unusually intimate relationship to philosophical theory. Whilst it would be too strong to say that anthropologists cannot make progress on problems about participation without engaging such philosophical theories of action, it is reasonable to expect that anthropologists should invite existing philosophical theories into their method-building. Anthropology does not have to reinvent the wheel. This chapter attempts to take concrete steps towards this end, drawing on the findings of philosophy of action in order to get a firmer grip on the unique merits of participation as a research method. We will see that philosophical debates about the properties of the social world have much to contribute concerning the conditions and possibilities that attach to participation. Philosophy of action promises a solid theoretical foundation on which anthropological methodology can rest and build.

The observation that anthropology should draw on philosophy in the investigation of its operant concepts may seem on its face to be quite innocent. Yet, whilst it would be wrong to suggest that anthropology does not engage philosophy, there is an undeniable tendency amongst anthropologists to ignore or dismiss the “Anglo-Saxon” or “analytic” branch of philosophy that currently dominates action theory for supposedly straying too far from the complex realities with which anthropologists are primarily concerned. The current debate within philosophy of action is in large proportion concerned with the

analytical segregation of individual wills, intentions, mental states or attitudes. Philosophical theories advanced to explain these phenomena tend to be reductive, assuming that shared action can be understood in terms of individual action and illustrating their claims with thought experiments which isolate specific phenomena while bracketing or ignoring complicating factors outside of this narrow focus. Across the board, the current philosophical debate does not use ‘real life examples’ of shared intentional agency. By this I do not mean that the content of the examples themselves are unrealistic—prominently, they include *singing a duet* or *taking a walk together* (Bratman 2014, Gilbert 1990). Rather, I mean that chosen examples rarely illustrate an author’s own participation. They do not originate in memory of a specific encounter, but are made up to serve the argument. This is commonly expressed with a conjecture: “Suppose then that you and I are singing a duet together...” (Bratman 2014: 152). Or, even more explicitly detached from a personal perspective, the examples are put to paper in the third person plural, signaling the presence of an omniscient author.⁴¹

The problem with such approaches, from the point of view of anthropologists, is that they bracket precisely the individually context-sensitive, partially non-propositional nitty-gritty of the lifeworld anthropologists wish to understand.⁴² Consider, for example, the question of what it is to paint a house together. A philosopher will approach this question by abstracting from many factors, including the historical, collective cultural and social past of each co-painter. Yet for the anthropologist, who is interested in specific ways of doing things and their relation to a form of life, this perspective overlooks the true meaning of this action—which resides precisely in its demanding, rich and “messy” context. These differences are often held to indicate a fundamental misalignment between the objectives and methods of analytic philosophy and those central to anthropological theory and method building, such that it is unclear how anthropologists can fruitfully draw on philosophical treatments of shared intentional action. Such theories seem mostly to lack the explanatory capacities to cater to the needs of a theory for anthropological empirical

⁴¹ “Imagine that a group of people are sitting on the grass in various places in the park” is how one of John Searle’s most frequently quoted example begins, before unfolding a hypothetical scenario of rainfall and seeking shelter (Searle 2002: 92). This way of framing an example does not sit well with the history-conscious anthropologist, aware of the problematic fact that for over a century of the discipline’s existence, conclusions about peoples and cultures were drawn by self-declared omniscient authors, too—typically drawing from travel journals of merchant traveler and colonial explorers. With time, mere extraction from the hypothetical experiences of others became frowned upon as both unscientific and unethical. Today, it is mostly held that ethnography comprises and depends on first-hand accounts that can only be generated through ‘actually being there’ (e.g. Ingold 2007). In this way of framing philosophical examples, we can thus detect a first reason for anthropology’s aversion against analytic, contemporary philosophy of action.

⁴² To this end, Förster states that “[s]ocial philosophers (e.g., Gilbert, 1989) often argue that intentions need to be communicated by the actors in order to turn into joint intentionality” and points out that “[u]nfortunately, very little is said about what that communication and expression looks like, namely if it works through cognition and language only”, while “many findings from empirical social research [...] show that participation in social practice often suffices to generate joint intentions” (Koechlin and Förster 2015: 215n11).

research. In some cases, their focus and basic assumptions even appear to be in conflict with the way shared intentional action within Participant Observation is framed.⁴³

As we will see in the course of this chapter, this pessimistic assessment is not without some basis. Of the three leading theories of shared action that we will examine, those proposed by Bratman and Gilbert will turn out to support, at least to some degree, the charges of reductivism that have been laid against philosophy of action. Bratman's view embodies the premise that it is useful to look at "simple" cases of shared intentional action first—cases stripped off their embedment in a broader context—and only then move towards "advanced", more complex occurrences of joint action. Within his view, context-sensitivity—especially in intercultural social settings—is pushed to the borders of the debate or fully bracketed as a "special case" philosophy does not (have to) grapple with. Gilbert, whilst avoiding some of the more obvious pitfalls of Bratman's reductivism, presupposes a largely shared lifeworld where the meaning and way a shared action is practiced is fully known to all parties before they start participating.

According to most dominant approaches in philosophy of action, when a practice is truly shared, all engaged parties should know that it is so and, on some level, agree on what is done collectively. Whereas contemporary action theorists usually designate specific shared intentional actions with a letter—famously, Michael Bratman does this with a capital *J*—anthropologists see one of their tasks in finding out what is it to *J*, not to assume that *J*-ing is an already clear, charted, shared concept. Anthropologists try to join in actions they do not (yet) understand in the wider context of the lifeworld they are embedded in. We need to keep in mind, and I will return to this point in later sections, that philosophical theories of action conceptualize ideal notions of shared intentional action while anthropologist grapple with the process of gradually, and perhaps asymptotically, getting closer to an instantiation of such an ideal notion.

Notwithstanding these observations, however, I believe there are fruitful avenues of philosophical investigation from which anthropologists can draw insight. Anscombe's treatment of action—which makes up the third tradition we shall consider—differs in significant ways from the two alternatives. Unlike the other two accounts, Anscombe does not offer a fleshed-out theory of shared action, but allows for her concept of intention to be fruitfully applied to both solitary and shared intentional action. My adaption of Anscombe's account of intention as generic will help in framing the beginning of a theoretical solution for the anthropological perils of participation. I claim that Anscombe's theory of intention

⁴³ Stoutland has even argued that there is an anti-social bias in the debate on shared action. He has observed that many examples discussed focus on cases like painting a house together or walking together—actions people do together but which they could have done separately, unlike "playing a Mozart quartet, getting married, playing football, or passing a law" (Stoutland 1997: 45). Michael Bratman argues that a discussion of participation must start with types of actions we could also do on our own, for we would otherwise risk assuming the very idea of social intention we wish to analyze (Bratman 1993: 101).

incorporates Aristotelian naturalism, which resembles a viable non-reductive alternative to the above views. Instead of reducing social action to non-moral or even to physical actions or facts, an Anscombian view holds that what human beings are and do determines how we live, and how we participate.

In spite of some real problems in finding channels of communication between philosophy and anthropology, then, worries about a fundamental or insurmountable mismatch between the two disciplines will turn out, by the time we reach the end of this chapter, to be groundless. Indeed, we will find that quite the opposite is true: work that has been done in the philosophy of action provides promising routes to help resolving the problems of Participant Observation.

For all that has been said, the question may remain for some whether, as anthropologists, we really need to wade into the swirling waters of philosophical theory to resolve the problems that are of interest to us. That anthropology does not solve the puzzle of what participation *is* might seem just fine because anthropology begins with the presumption that Participant Observation is a helpful tool, perhaps just like chemistry, today, begins with the presumption that the right way to analyze atoms is according to the quantum mechanical model. Every discipline has to start somewhere. I hope to have motivated, however, the need to scrutinize the basic method of anthropology in a conceptual way. For, unlike the quantum mechanical model, Participant Observation is ill-defined.

To point out that anthropology has *not* solved this problem, however, is not yet to explain why we need philosophy to solve it. Which brings me to the perhaps obvious claim that when we begin to call into question basic assumptions of human action and knowledge, we are already doing philosophy. Philosophy, in this respect, is unique because its object of investigation is potentially everything, but at the same time philosophy is not merely the sum of all other sciences. Rather, it examines the foundations all other sciences rest and build on. The problem with simply inviting philosophical theories is that the debate on shared action has become so specialized and at the same time entangled with sister debates—depending on what we think “action” or “knowledge” means, our perspective on shared action is likely to differ—that it is hard to see, coming from the outside, which theory would be suitable to deal with the epistemological problems Participant Observation is faced with. I therefore offer a discussion of three theories within philosophy of action that will help to see which way to go. The plan for the chapter is as follows.

I will begin, in section 2.2, by providing a very general overview of participation as a topic of philosophical study. I will then, in section 2.3, describe and analyze three major theories of collective intentionality: Bratman’s planning theory of acting together, Gilbert’s plural subject theory and my own theoretical development of Anscombe’s conceptualization of intention into an account of shared action. All of these theories are

founded on a common presumption that participation or shared action is *intentional*, and that the best way to explore participation is thus to think about the possibilities and condition of shared intentions.⁴⁴ Apart from this, they are each very different. I will review each theory with an eye to the problems Participant Observation poses as framed in chapter 1.

Although the merits and perils of each strand should become visible from a strictly philosophical view, the work done in this chapter is meant as a steppingstone for a confrontative investigation of how to implement these findings into a fruitful conception of participation for anthropology. This review will also clarify why I lay the focus on mentioned three accounts, and not on others. In a nutshell, I have picked three accounts that behave very differently when confronted with the challenges of participation in anthropology. Bratman's proposal is built on the assumption that *shared* intention can be analyzed into a complex of interlocking *individual* intentions plus 'common knowledge'. This type of reductivism dominates the debate and deserves mention as a paradigm of the current standard view. It will become clear in what way it follows the Weberian dictum of methodological individualism with regards to *social action*, and why this circumstance makes it an unfit candidate to help in conceptualizing Participant Observation. Gilbert's contractualism, on the other hand, does not strictly follow, but in relevant aspects draws on a structuralist approach towards shared agency, with Durkheimian *social facts* at its center. Discussing her theory will clarify the significance of non-propositional knowledge and highlight the problem of apparent holistic tendencies with an underlying individualistic basis. Her plural subject theory, whilst not without merits, faces two serious problems deriving from her conception of participation. Finally, Anscombe's implicit explanation of a shared action is shown to provide a *generic* account of intentional action, in the sense that it allows for an explanation of both solitary and shared action as deriving from the same principle—the principle of intentional action—which is indifferent to the number of participating agents. This third proposal, I will argue, promises a way of understanding of how to frame 'common knowledge', which qualifies as a necessary condition for participation.

As I want to disclose in this chapter, the key to a viable conception of 'common knowledge', both in its own right and as a core aspect of participation as anthropologists seek to frame it, is to understand intentional action as an act of *practical*, not *theoretical* reasoning. My own development of an Anscombian account on common practical knowledge will be valuable in the chapters to come, where I will examine the act of participation through the lens of a specific shared action—walking together—in the rich and complex social setting of post-apartheid South Africa.

⁴⁴ I henceforth use 'shared action' and 'participation' synonymously.

2.2 Philosophy of action: a general overview

Shared living is shared perceiving and shared knowing.

— Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics VII.12: 1244b 24-25

The question “What is participation?” has been discussed by philosophers at least since antiquity—although not under the heading of *participation* used by anthropologists, nor the term of *collective intentionality* favored by many contemporary philosophers. In his *Politics*, Aristotle writes of man as the *zoon politicon* or *social animal*: he is the creature who lives in strong, social interdependence of community (Pol. 1.2, 1253a18-29); and who is to a higher degree a state-forming creature than any bee or herd animal (Pol. 1.2, 1253a7-19). Human thriving, in the Aristotelian tradition, is essentially characterized through participation—not merely in the sense that humans *are* group animals but in that they *do* group-forming and group-sustaining things.⁴⁵

Looking forward to the beginnings of modern philosophy, we see participation playing a critical role in Kant’s philosophical anthropology. For Kant, the tension between morality and free will finds expression in his concept of *sensus communis*, a capacity for judgement which takes into account the mode of imagination of every other person in thought in order to direct its judgement, as it were, towards the totality of human reason.⁴⁶ Kant adds that the development or progress of humankind is achieved through a special kind of social antagonism, a tension which he identifies as *ungesellige Geselligkeit*, the unsociable sociability of man.⁴⁷ He transcends that tension with his principle of morality, which intertwines autonomy with the obligation to mutual, equal respect and its consequential struggle to engage with others in a way compatible with the moral principle gained through the actualized *sensus communis*.

Wittgenstein takes a different route to make explicit the foundational character of participation. He calls into question the possibility of a private language (that is a language which “another person cannot understand” [PI: §243]) and discusses language’s

⁴⁵ Although in Aristotelian metaphysics, relation is subordinate to substance (*hypokeimenon*) (Met Z1-9), and Aristotle formulates human’s aspiration for *self-sufficiency* as a requirement for happiness, this is not to say that the individual is logically or temporally prior to the community. As Schmid argues, the connection between relation and relata is of a different kind; it is not the case that what is related is logically independent of the relation itself. In a certain sense, relation and relata constitute each other reciprocally: There is no common intention without the intention of individual persons. At the same time, the respective intentionality of an individual is only what it is through the relation itself (Schmid 2005: 239).

⁴⁶ In his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1974), Kant defines the *sensus communis* as “die Idee eines gemeinschaftlichen Sinnes, d.i. eines Beurteilungsvermögens [...], welches in seiner Reflexion auf die Vorstellungsart jedes andern in Gedanken (a priori) Rücksicht nimmt, um gleichsam an die gesamte Menschenvernunft sein Urteil zu halten” (KU: V, 293-294).

⁴⁷ Here, the notorious “I” so central to German idealism’s understanding of self-consciousness comes into play, which is not the empirical, individual “I” of a single human, but encompasses the idea of trans-individual, universal self-perception. I cannot do its meaning and bearings justice here, as the idea of participation in Kant is worth a full study in its own right. What is most important for the development of social ontology is that in Kant, the individual inclination to socialize and participate is countered by a tendency to insulate oneself.

constitutive connection to rules collectively and normatively established within a form of life. Some scholars have concluded from this that language is a communal enterprise that no-one is able to pursue alone. A slightly weaker reading of the “Private Language Argument” assumes that it merely casts doubt on what an individual can be certain of in isolation. Either way, participation conceived as partaking in a common “language game”, became a focal point for fruitful debates on the nature of linguistic communication and its significance for epistemology, philosophy of mind—and philosophy of action.

The Aristotelian idea of participation as a moving act rather than a state of being, the Kantian connection between willful action and morality and the Wittgensteinian coupling of having a thought and sharing it all continue to play major roles in the current philosophical debate on shared action. They are just three examples of how mainstream philosophical thought is marked by an image of humans as striving towards participation.

Within contemporary philosophy, questions about participation fall under the rubric of “the philosophy of action”. Philosophical theories exploring the social dimension of willful human action and its causes are often classified under the heading of “social ontology”. The Anglo-Saxon branch of this sub-discipline has laid conceptual foundations of social phenomena with particular emphasis on the keywords *collective intentionality*, *we-intentions*, *shared* or *joint agency*, *group action* and *group mind*. The concept of collective intentionality, and the question of what it means for individuals to form a collective will directed towards common goals, rose to prominence with Raimo Tuomela and Kaarlo Miller’s paper “We-Intentions” in the late 1980s. The text gave rise to a focused philosophical analysis of collective intentionality, which is how intentions took center stage in philosophy of action and became essential for the conception of voluntary action, both solitary and shared.⁴⁸ Within this new conceptual framework, an action is considered to be shared only if there is at least some sense in which its participants have intended it. In this context, intentions are what gives teleological meaning to actions, what distinguishes the Rylean (or Geertzian) twitch from a wink.

In the specialized vocabulary of philosophy, the extension and meaning of the term ‘intention’ varies from its ordinary usage. In ordinary English language use, an intention is a desire, drive or need. In the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, intentions are a type of cognitive manifestation or actualization of *intentionality*, the capacity of the mind to be about something. In simpler terms, intentionality refers to a wide variety of mental states—including not only the ordinary notion of intentions but also beliefs, perceptions—that we would classify under the broad heading of thinking. The notion of intentionality is thus somewhat obscure, as on the one hand it denotes the “aboutness” of the mind, but on the

⁴⁸ Evidently, the idea that intentions are central for human action arose much earlier. As we will see in section 2.3.3, it was treated by Anscombe in the late 1950s—with reference to Thomas Aquinas, who in turn was fundamentally Aristotelian. What I refer to in this section is merely the comparatively recent rise of what I have labelled above as “social ontology”.

other it is used as a noun for the general occurrence of the phenomenon of intention. Either way, one crucial aspect of intentionality for the course of our investigation is that, depending on the theory in which the concept is used, it does not just denote the capacity to have mental states in the form of propositional content.⁴⁹ Intentionality can also involve non-propositional (or “non-conceptual”) content: images and pictures; anything that is about, or represents, something, even if it does not do so in the same way that sentences do.

As we will see in the sections to come, the stance of each theory towards the possibility of non-propositional content co-constituting shared intentions can be led back to a far-reaching divide in philosophical action theory. In his 1985 paper, “Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind”, Charles Taylor promotes the need for a deeper understanding of the historical development of the debate on the nature of action and offers a historically minded interpretation of how this division came about. He identifies two lines within the development of philosophy of action, delineating two rival methodologies for philosophical inquiry in general, and philosophy of action in particular. According to the first line, actions are a special type of event, which are distinguished from other types of events (like the falling of rain) by their causes. This “causal view”, as Taylor names it, takes actions to be physical movements that are brought about by desires, intentions, beliefs, or some combination thereof (1985: 78). What separates actions, qua physical movements, from mere events is their inner, ‘mental’ background.

Against this, Taylor describes a second family of views that understands actions as qualitatively different from mere events. On this “qualitative view”, intentional actions are intrinsically directed by their purposes and thus qualitatively different from physical movements: “[T]hey are in a sense inhabited by the purposes which direct them, so that action and purpose are ontologically inseparable” (1985: 78). This qualitative distinction between actions and mere events implies that an expression of an action’s purpose lies in the action itself. The qualitative view is incompatible with the causal view because it refuses to see an action in terms of mere events plus a particular kind of cause that is brought about by intentions and desires. This second line shares its main premises with Anscombe’s conception of intention: Intentional action is qualitatively different from a mere event and the purpose of an action is inseparable from the action itself.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ A proposition is a statement that is true or false. It expresses, in the descriptive form of a sentence, knowledge about what is (or what is not) the case. For instance, “Makhanda is in South Afrika” is a proposition.

⁵⁰ This is my attempt to situate Anscombe’s work in the qualitative family of views on action. I will not take the long and windy road through the controversial reception of her book *Intention*. But I want to signpost two major aspects of it. Firstly, when the book came out in 1957, it was widely considered to follow the lines of the then-orthodox interpretation of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of action laid out in his 1953 *Philosophical Investigations*, which Anscombe co-translated from German into English and which was then widely taken to contain a decisively anti-causal view. Secondly, and perhaps surprisingly, Donald Davidson—himself firmly anchored in the causal tradition—cited Anscombe’s *Intention* affirmatively, and described the book as “the most important treatment of action since Aristotle” on its 2000 front cover. As Lucy Campbell notes, interpretations of Anscombe’s work shifted with the interpretation of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and then again with Davidson’s appropriation (Campbell 2018: 580-581). *Intention* thus does not have one canonized interpretation with regard to its most basic meaning.

One issue that underlies the difference between the two families of views is the place of the subject. For the defender of the qualitative view, the distinction between action and non-action must be one that occurs to us *as agents*. Taylor suggests that a basic, non-reducible distinction between an action and a mere event is essential to a person's self-understanding as an agent (1985: 79). For the qualitative view, the place of the subject is thus where the categorical distinction between mere events and intentional action is made. The causal view, by contrast, is motivated by the ambition to go beyond a subjective standpoint of the agent and thus come to an objective understanding of things that is no longer tied to a specific viewpoint. Taylor suggests that if agency imposes the qualitative conception of action, the causal conception appears as the superior analysis, being "an objective portrayal of the way things really stand, of the real components of action *an sich*" (1985: 79). Taylor argues that such a causal conception of action has its roots in the mostly dualist outlook common to both Cartesian and Empiricist theories of the 17th century, which supports "a clear ontological separation between outer events and inner background" (ibid.: 78). Each in their own way, both schools of thought were motivated by the need for a more solid—that is, an objective—ground for knowledge claims.

The most relevant ramification of the qualitative view is that it allows what Taylor calls "agent's knowledge": "The notion is that we are capable of grasping our own action in a way that we cannot come to know external objects and events" (ibid.: 80). The qualitative view distinguishes between the agent's knowledge and knowledge of other objects. Intentional action is distinct in that it is intrinsically directed and aimed to encompass our purposes. We know what we are doing, however faintly, because it is us who are doing it. This contrasts with knowledge of other objects, to which we only have access through observation.

As agents, we will already have some sense, however dim, inarticulate or subliminal, of what we are doing [...] So agent's knowledge is a matter of bringing this sense to formulation, articulation or full consciousness. It is a matter of making articulate something that we already have an inarticulate sense of. (ibid.)

Thus, on the qualitative view, intentional action can be vastly unreflecting, carried out without monitoring awareness. Taylor adds that

we may then become aware of what we are doing, formulate our ends. So following on a conscious desire or intention is not an inescapable feature of action. On the contrary, this degree of awareness in our actions is something we come to achieve. (ibid.: 84)

This brings out an interesting aspect of the qualitative view for anthropological method building because it speaks to the circumstances under which anthropologists try to participate in actions they do not fully understand. It also highlights the conditions under which participation may come into being, as it is, here, not viewed as a thoroughly conscious act that can, from the beginning, be clearly verbalized. Rather, according to the qualitative view, the aspect of gradually learning and coming to understand what we are doing *as we are doing it* becomes an integral part of intentional action itself.

According to the causal view, by contrast, there is no distinction between agent's knowledge and knowledge of external objects and events. Because my action is an external event like any other save for its having a certain kind of cause, "I cannot claim to know it in some special way" (1985: 81). On the causal view, what I can have a distinct kind of knowledge of is my intention, the *cause* of my action; I can be "transparently and immediately aware of the content of my mind" (ibid.). But this epistemic privilege does not extend to the intentional action caused by the mental state that is thus known. The knowledge I have of my action is thus not practical, but *theoretical*: it is knowledge that is gained from an object. The thought of the object is different from its object in that it merely represents it. Our theoretical thinking must thus conform to the world. Practical knowledge, by contrast, is *identical* with its object. In my practical thought of *J*-ing, according to the qualitative view, I *create* the intentional action. Here we have a third disagreement within the two families of views: Whereas the causal view is concerned with agent's knowledge as *theoretical* knowledge, the qualitative view takes knowledge of action to be *practical*.

Taylor's inquiry serves our mission to frame Participant Observation by teasing out the different presumptions between two antithetic lines of doing philosophy. His exploration of two opposing conceptions of shared action uncovers in what respect their difference derives not simply from disagreement about what agency is, but disagreement about how to go about philosophy. Often invisible in the debate itself, some assumptions regarding basic modes of inquiry remain largely uncontested, or fundamental critique against rival camps is ignored in the other. I will, throughout the chapter, return to this distinction to highlight specific features of contemporary theories of shared action and their implications for anthropological method building. With this in mind, we are now ready to review three theories of shared action.

2.3 Three conceptions of intention; three conceptions of participation

Within philosophical approaches, the project of understanding shared action is typically regarded as a specific iteration of what is perhaps the most general and fundamental question with which philosophers of action are concerned: What are actions? Consider an individual action, such as moving one's hand. What is the difference between a person's performing an action of this sort and a mere event, in which that person's hand is knocked by something without their deliberately moving it? Shared actions like walking together or playing ball together, as species of action, give rise to the same questions. What is the difference between two people throwing a ball to each other and a ball's bouncing from one person to the other without their having any deliberate role in making this happen?

According to the standard view, intentional actions are a special type of event, special in that they are caused by *mental* or *psychological* states of the agent bringing them about. This peculiar way of thinking is what needs to be explained in order to distill an account of intentional action. Put differently, the standard view wants to find out what *x* represents in the following equation, which alludes to Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following:

I intentionally raise my arm =: my arm goes up + *x*

Hence, defining an intentional action necessitates explaining what needs to be added to a mere bodily movement in order for it to be(come) an intentional action. What I call the standard view is what is most prominently expressed in Davidson (1980).

The standard conception of agency that is taken to explain individual action is typically also assumed to be implicated in *shared* action. As Ben Laurence indicates,

[m]any contemporary philosophers addressing [the question of shared action] take for granted a familiar conception of solitary action, or of acting alone. On this conception, a solitary intentional action is a species of event that is caused in some special way by the psychological states of its agent".
(2011: 270)

Notice that if we accept the standard view applied to shared action, we have to confront the question of what distinguishes a shared action from an individual action. An account of intentional action can be called *individualistic* if it tries to account for shared agency in terms of attitudes of the individuals involved. As the first example discussed in detail below, Michael Bratman's version of the standard view will first try to come to an understanding of what solitary intentional actions are and then use this understanding to proceed to shared actions. There is an explanatory step to be made from individual to shared action

and Bratman's theory seeks to examine and explain that very step. Laurence, outlining the basic assumptions of the standard view, observed that the thought guiding the proponents of this view is

that if we outfit individual agents with psychological states having an elaborate enough content and make these states jointly cause an event in the right way, then we will have accounted for collective action. In this way, they attempt to extend the standard paradigm to the case of collective agency. (2011: 271)

Consequently, such accounts of shared action are characterized as individualistic and reductive. The proponents of this view treat shared action like a complicated, special case of solitary intentional action. The social is secondary to the individual. By contrast, opponents of the standard view see shared action either as a *sui generis* phenomenon—this is what Gilbert claims—or they frame, as Anscombe does, intentions in a way that applies to both individual and shared action in the same way.

Drawing together the two lines of thought discussed above, we can see the project of understanding shared action as a matter of answering two key questions. First, what is it for something to be an action? And, second, what is it for an action to be shared rather than individual? In considering theories of shared action, these two distinct questions serve as dimensions along which individual theories can be distinguished and compared.

2.3.1 Michael Bratman's reductive conception of participation

Michael Bratman is among the philosophers who endorse the standard view.⁵¹ According to Bratman, what distinguishes an action from a mere event is that it *additionally* contains an intention of the agent to act.⁵² Accordingly, to say what an intentional action is is to explain what needs to be added to a mere bodily movement in order for it to be an intentional action. Bratman interprets an intention as a commitment to (future) actions (Bratman 1997: 220-221). For him, the value of *x* is an intention of the agent that is related to the movement in such a way that the intention can *explain* the movement. The connection between intention and movement is causal: My arm goes up *because* I want it to.

In a series of papers, Bratman has proposed a broadly *individualistic* and *reductive* account of shared agency (Bratman 1993, 1999, 2009 and 2014). *Individualistic* because it seeks to account for shared agency in terms of attitudes of all individuals involved.

⁵¹ I take Bratman to roughly follow the standard view, even if he disagrees with some details of Davidson's picture. In later papers (see e.g. Bratman 2009: 46-55) and especially in his 2014 book *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together*, Bratman substantially enriches his analysis of intentional action with further conditions involving beliefs about the efficacy and interdependence of these intentions. None of these replenishments matter for the purpose of this work, which for now is to demonstrate the core aspects of reductionism and its juxtaposition with rival accounts.

⁵² For Laurence's reference to Bratman, see Laurence 2011: 271.

Reductive because in Bratman's view, an explanation of shared action can be given solely in terms of the conceptual apparatus by which he explains solitary action. Consequently, no further concepts are needed in order to make sense of what it means to intentionally *J* together.⁵³ Shared agency is not a *sui generis* phenomenon, but just a complex arrangement of materials already available in an account of the intentional actions of a single person.⁵⁴ I will return to this point shortly. Let me first give you the Bratmanian equation to be solved in a case of shared action:

We intentionally *J* together =: I behave in a way appropriate to doing my part in *J*-ing + *xm* (my intention to *J*) and you behave in a way appropriate to doing your part in *J*-ing + *xy* (your intention to *J*)

Bratman suggests that the missing elements *xm* and *xy* stand for a shared intentional *content* in your and my intentions that is appropriately connected to your and my behavior so that the former can explain the latter. He proceeds to spell out what such a shared intention consists in by again applying a variant of the same analytic model: Bratman proposes that we take individual beliefs and intentions for granted and hopes that we can disassemble shared intentions from these (on his account conceptually simpler) elements:

My conjecture is that we should [...] understand shared intention, in the basic case, as a state of affairs consisting primarily of appropriate attitudes of each individual participant and their interrelations. (Bratman 1993: 99)

Returning to Bratman's methodological strategy, what is still remarkable is its reductivism. Again: Bratman sees shared activity as a complex phenomenon consisting of simpler elements assembled together according to some structural principle. Accordingly, Bratman suggests that we analyze the phenomenon of collective intentionality by identifying the simple (and presumably understood) elements and the structural principle according to which they interweave to form a whole. Shared agency, for him, thus relies solely on the intentions of the individuals:

[T]he relevant intentions of the participants interlock in the sense that each intends that the shared activity go in part by way of the relevant intentions of each of the other participants. (Bratman 2009: 47-48)

It is a consequence of this sort of analytical strategy that neither the elements nor the structural principle is allowed to contain any reference to the complex phenomenon to be analyzed. So, an account of shared action of this kind only allows for material that is neutral

⁵³ Henceforth, following Bratman, "*J*" will be used as a placeholder for all intentional actions used in examples—my own as well as quoted ones.

⁵⁴ I am grateful to Christian Kietzmann for discussing with me Bratman's account of shared action during my stay in Leipzig in July 2014. Kietzmann pointed out to me in what sense Bratman's account can be seen as both reductive and individualistic.

as to the shared character of what is going on. Neither the individual movements underlying the shared action, nor the shared intention that makes a shared action out of the movements, nor again the principle that connects all of this will make any reference to ‘sharedness’. An immediate consequence of Bratman’s reductive conception of agency is thus the *individualism* built into his account. His analysis is framed in terms of individual attitudes and the content of these attitudes is neutral as to the shared character of the activities in question.

2.3.1.1 Implications for Participant Observation

If we follow Bratman’s view of shared action, what would that mean for the method of Participant Observation?

Concerning one of its main attributes, *context-dependence of action perception*, Bratman’s account is largely silent. His theoretical focus lays on shared intentional activities of small groups in the absence of asymmetric power relations, in which the participants are constant over time (2014: 7). Bratman’s concern is with the action-theoretic aspects of sociality, not with its moral or otherwise evaluative features. He therewith leaves out most of the discussed problems anthropologists are faced with in the field, where asymmetric power relations may have a major influence on the quality of the shared activities. Also, the temporal stability of the researcher’s group membership, due to limited time in the field, is not given, but another precondition of Bratman’s planning theory of action together. Bratman does briefly discuss power asymmetries (2014: 38, 55, 102), but merely has in view mutually exclusive conditions under which to fulfil a specific intentional shared act. He points out that sub-plans do not have to mesh in order for an action to be shared. His examples are a slave and his master building a bridge together, unequal bargaining powers when two adults plan a trip to New York City together, and two people playing chess together, where the competitive nature of the game produces no expectation of meshing sub-plans all the way down if each player truly wants to win. In all three examples, the social asymmetry is easily tracked to the sub-plans each participant has, and in which these sub-plans are out in the open to all participants. Participation in the field is different in that social asymmetry might be much more subtle because it is tacitly embedded in the wider context of the social setting: historical background, colonialism, race, gender, age difference and so forth are ever-present, yet not presently out in the open in the way Bratman describes it in his examples.⁵⁵ Returning to the overall goals of Bratman’s account, these three examples already represent special cases of his general

⁵⁵ For instance, the bargaining advantage in the case of the two people planning a trip to New York City together consists in one person threatening the other to destroy his reputation if they go by bus, and not by car (2014: 55). The way in which sub-plans do not mesh, in this case, is clear.

point. To anthropologists, social asymmetry embedded in the wider context of a situation in which the shared action takes place is the norm. Bratman's account does not provide a clear answer to a crucial question for Participant Observation: *How to participate in an action tied up in a foreign, context-sensitive cultural setting?* However, Bratman does not exclude the possibility of shared intentional action in such settings, but merely confines the elaborateness of his account to non-asymmetric social settings. Participation in the field simply falls outside of the domain he explicitly treats.

Moving on to a second major aspect of participation in the field, the *sharing of non-propositional content*, at the face of it, Bratman's account could fit the bill. His account is plainly causal, and causes can be non-propositional. He does address the issue of conceptual convergence, and notes that although he makes the simplified assumption in his examples that in a shared intention to *J* all participants will have a shared conception of *J*, this is not to say that the participants will have to converge on all their beliefs or preferences about *J*:

Each can intend that we *J* even if one believes certain things about what *J* would lead to and has a preference for that, while the other has instead different beliefs or preferences. (2014: 42)

He takes this one step further by alluding to the possibility that even the very assumption of a common *J* could be weakened:

Perhaps we can share an intention to go to NYC if I intend that we go to the city that is the home of the Yankees and you intend that we go to the city that is the home of the Mets. But these are matters we do not need to settle here. (2014: 42)

In a footnote to this last remark, Bratman adds that in many cases there would be agreement about what it is to *J* "at a somewhat abstract level even when there is not agreement at a more specific level" (2014: 170n5). Although Bratman here is not directly addressing the issue of non-propositional content, but rather the issue of conceptual convergence, we can take this as a clue as to what Bratman's account would look like for non-propositional knowledge. For if there needs to be only overlap, or convergence, at a "somewhat abstract level" in order for an intention to *J*, and thus an intentional action to be shared, then this could also allow for the content of *J* to be non-propositional. The individual joining in the action would have to have the *capacity* for propositional thinking, and to fill the predicate *J* of *J*-ing with *some* content, but Bratman's account does not explicitly demand for this content to be propositional. It could thus also be in the form of a picture, or image.

Overall, Bratman's account looks like a promising, albeit somewhat unpolished candidate for anthropological method building concerned with participation. However, there are some serious problems with his account as such. In the following section, I ponder on two of them. The first considers an explanatory gap that opens up between his distinction between an agent's intentions and the bodily movements they provoke. The second concerns his use of the term 'common knowledge', which Bratman puts forward as part of his proposal for a principle of shared agency. Bratman introduces 'common knowledge' to close this very gap—but his concept, as we will see, remains too vague to fill it solidly.

2.3.1.2 Bratman's first problem: the causal bridge

According to Bratman, our intentions and the movements they give rise to are distinct entities. This means that there is an explanatory gap between them that must be bridged. Of course, the bridge is thought to be causal: The movements are there *because* the agent has these intentions that bring them about.

A problem with Bratman's proposal emerges once we notice that we can imagine cases where all this is true and there is nevertheless no action of the 'right' kind—for our purposes, no *shared action*. Imagine two people, Ntando and Susan, planning to kill their former friend Khethiwe in such a way that it looks like an accident. The plan is that Ntando takes Khethiwe for a walk and hustles her onto Mandela Street right when the morning bus passes, and Susan crosses Mandela Street with a stuffed baby sling so that the bus driver, in order to avoid Susan and the (nonexistent) baby, runs over Khethiwe. At the appointed time, however, Ntando gets very nervous. As a result, he trips and inadvertently pushes Khethiwe onto Mandela street, whereas Susan, also out of nervousness, loses her way and, as she thinks she is still *on her way* to Mandela Street, runs *right onto* it when the morning bus arrives. The bus swerves, runs over Khethiwe and kills her.⁵⁶

From one point of view, everything went according to plan. The movements that occurred are, in a way, precisely those that Ntando and Susan had intended. And in some sense, they happened because of their intention: it was their intention to get Khethiwe killed that made them nervous and caused Ntando to trip and Susan to lose her way. But intuitively, the intention did not cause their movements in the way that they had planned. Therefore, seen from another point of view, what happened did not at all go according to plan. Everything *just happened*, in a way that led to the desired end but not through the intended means. Thus, an analysis of shared activity according to which it is individual

⁵⁶ This is a version of Christian Kietzmann's example in his unpublished paper "Two Conceptions of Shared Agency".

movements caused by individual attitudes is open to the objection that all these elements, movements, attitudes and causality, can be present without amounting to shared activity.⁵⁷

The problem consists in the possibility of causal chains deviating from the way agents *intended* things to happen; a possibility that is not ruled out by Bratman's account. We are thus inclined to ask: Did the problems inherent in Bratman's account begin with his conception of solitary intentional action? I am inclined to say yes, given my view of Bratman's account as *reductive*: his entire account of shared action derives from his account of solitary intentional action.

Several solutions have been proposed for this problem—one of which, proposed by Bratman himself, I will go into below. My point for now, however, is simply to observe that there is a problem which arises because of the assumption that movements and attitudes are distinct entities. And one way to overcome this problem is to abandon the assumption that brought it about.

2.3.1.3 Bratman's second problem: the concept 'common knowledge'

Bratman does have his own proposal for how to fix the problem we have identified. To be clear: We want an account of shared action that excludes cases where causality can be present without resulting in shared activity. In our case: that Khethiwe's death just so happened. Khethiwe's death would not have just so happened if both Susan and Ntando shared knowledge of what each of them were doing during the whole period of time that belongs to the planned shared action—the killing of Khethiwe. They need common knowledge of their plan. This common knowledge is the centerpiece of Bratman's attempt to fix the problem I have just sketched.

Bratman puts forward the following proposal for how to analyze *shared intention*:

⁵⁷ There is a familiar example in the debate, derived from Daniel Dennett and revised by Davidson, that focuses on *solitary* intentional action. Similar critical considerations as those we just made for our Khethiwe-case apply: Jones is holding Smith on a rope. He wants to get rid of Smith's weight because he believes that he cannot hold on to it much longer. He also believes that if he doesn't let go soon, they will both die. Jones' intention to let go plus his belief that he will die if he does not let go make him nervous and as a result his palms get sweaty, causing him to actually loosen his grip on the rope. The rope slips out of his hand—and Jones gets what he wanted. See Davidson 1980: 78-79.

Shared Intention Thesis (SI Thesis)

We intend to *J* if and only if:

- (1) (a) I intend that we *J* and (b) you intend that we *J*.
- (2) I intend that we *J* in accordance with and because of (1)(a), (1)(b), and meshing subplans of (1)(a) and (1)(b); you intend that we *J* in accordance with and because of (1)(a), (1)(b), and meshing subplans of (1)(a) and (1)(b).
- (3) (1) and (2) are common knowledge between us.

(Bratman 1999: 131)

(1) is in accordance with our very first presumption that in order for an action to be shared it must be intentional. According to Bratman, (1) ensures “that the participants in a shared intention to *J* each are, in a way, committed to *J*-ing” (ibid.). Recalling Bratman’s interpretation of intentions as commitments to (future) actions, my commitment to *J* can be explained in terms of my intention that we, you and I, *J* together. Vice versa, your commitment to *J* is explained in this way.

Let us consider the first part of (2). It states that my intention to *J* must be in accordance with your intention to *J* in order to rule out cases in which we both intend to *J*, but not in a way on which we both agree. Suppose, to follow Bratman’s own example, you and I intend to go to New York together and I intend to do this by kidnapping you and taking you to New York in the trunk of my Volvo. Bratman states that

[i]n intending to coerce you in this way I intend to bypass your intentional agency. And that seems not to support coordinated planning about how we are going to New York. Granted, if I succeed in what I intend, our activity will in a way be unified: we will indeed go together to New York. But since the way our activity is tied together bypasses your relevant intentions, this is not the kind of unified agency characteristic of shared intention. (1999: 118)

The second part of (2) demands that both you and I intend that we *J* in accordance with and because of our meshing subplans. What exactly “meshing subplans” are is unclear. All we get from Bratman concerning this question is that “there is some way we could *J* that would not violate either of our subplans but would, rather, involve the successful execution of these subplans” (1999: 130). Bratman gives us no explanation of how we come to have our subplans mesh; rather, he takes for granted that we can.

We can attempt to make intelligible his demand in (3) according to which both “(1) and (2) are *common knowledge* between us” (ibid.: 131, my emphasis). Let me reformulate it by saying that for an intentional action to be shared, the fact that we are sharing an action

must be *in the open*.⁵⁸ And surely, we can think of cases where we explicitly *state* our intentions to do something together. Let us assume that Ntando and Susan, in the mood for diversion after the successful killing of Khethiwe, intend to go for a walk together. Ntando says: “Let’s go for a stroll, I need to walk off some tension.” Susan replies “Sure, let’s do this.” Ambling towards the outskirts of town together, they reach a small dam, where Susan spontaneously jumps in, swims a few strokes and then sits down at the sunny shore. Ntando, now irritated with Susan, walks towards her and complains: “What are you doing? I thought we said that we would go for a walk together.” Susan replies, “But we are, aren’t we?”

Apparently, Ntando and Susan have different concepts of *walking together*. As it turns out, Ntando has a stricter sense of *walking together*—according to which his walking companion should stroll by his side during the entire time of the walk. In Susan’s mind, meanwhile, for two people to walk together, each party is allowed to briefly break loose—for a quick swim, for instance. She entertains a weaker sense of *walking together*.

Replacing ‘common knowledge’ with a more familiar concept—something like ‘being in the open’—does not help because we still do not know *how* this is supposed to happen. Openly agreeing to “walking together” is not sufficient for the action to be out in the open in the sense that all parties have common knowledge on what exactly *walking together* involves. The walking case shows that it is not enough to say that a seemingly explicit statement of what it is people want to do together implies that they necessarily are thinking of it as the same set of actions.

The problem with Bratman’s view which I am addressing here is that it gives rise to the skeptical objection that once we leave the territory of first person thought, we cannot know how we come to ‘common knowledge’ of doing something together: Bratman thinks that all of our complex network of interlocking intentions must be *out in the open* (between us). But he does not say what exactly this entails, or to what it amounts. Given the fact that only bodily movement is plainly out in the open (if even), but intentions, mental or psychological states are not (or at least not *on their own*), Bratman would have to say more about how one is supposed to arrive at a common knowledge of intentions.

Now, Bratman might object that we did not respect part (2) of his *SI Thesis*, stating that for an action to be shared, its “subplans” must “mesh”. He could insist that both the Khethiwe-case and the walking-case are excluded by (2) because in both scenarios, Susan and Ntando had no “meshing subplans”. But this reply does not help his cause. After making plain the lack of a feasible concept of common knowledge, there is nothing to be gained from part (2) for it also relies on common knowledge. In fact, it makes the account even more blurry: not only do we not know how to gain common knowledge, it is just as

⁵⁸ Bratman reformulates his demand in (3) by saying that the knowledge in question must be “public”. (Bratman 1999: 102-103).

unclear how exactly we should divide our shared plans into neat pieces of subplans. Not every case is as clear as, let us say, the case of you and me making tea together (where we could call one subplan “filling the kettle” and the other “lighting the stove”). The more complex matters get, the less clear it is how to divide them into subplans. Moreover, stating that plans of any kind must be “meshed” to make possible parts of a *shared* action, does not get us further either—we want to agree *that* such plans must interlock in order to be part of a shared action, but Bratman gives no explanation for how we should come to have this common knowledge—rather, he takes for granted that we *can* have it and states that in order to share an action, we *must* have it: “I will know that we have these intentions, you will know that we have these intentions, I will at least be in the position to know this, and so on” (1997: 102).

2.3.1.4 Conclusion Bratman

Bratman’s individualistic conception of agency, while seemingly a good fit for anthropological method building, presented a first difficulty in that a gap emerged between our intentions and the movements they give rise to. Bratman thinks this bridge to be causal. To make up for what his account of solitary intentional action was incapable of explaining in the case of *shared* agency, he suggests the concept of common knowledge as a necessary condition for an action to be shared: All parties involved in a shared action must commonly know what it is they are doing together. His concept of common knowledge turned out to be blurry. Looking for help in condition (2) of his *SI Thesis*, we found two equally cloudy concepts: “meshing” and “subplans”. The demand that the subordinated actions (i.e. “subplans”) , like (i) Ntando’ pushing Khethiwe onto Mandela Street and (ii) Susan’s walking in front of the bus, must interlock (that is “mesh”) does not illuminate the concept of common knowledge nor does it help Bratman’s account of shared action in any other way. As things stand, his conception of solitary intentional action does not suffice for an expansion to cases of shared action that can be fully understood with nothing but the building blocks from his account of solitary intentional action and is thus incapable of fully closing the explanatory gap between individual intentions to share in the same action and the common knowledge necessary for their levelling. With ‘meshing subplans’ in (2) and ‘common knowledge’ in (3), Bratman *states* reasonable necessary conditions for a shared action, but does not explain how to fulfil these conditions.

What can we take away from this first interrogation? First of all, it seems promising to look for illuminative substitutes for both stated conditions and their respective construction: How can so-called subplans mesh? How do we secure common knowledge? What does it take for an intention to be ‘out in the open’? Secondly, at least some of the problems with Bratman’s account are connected with its basic subscription to

individualism. In what follows, I will discuss two philosophers who both seemingly follow non-individualistic conceptions of shared action: Gilbert and Anscombe. Both share a sense in which a shared intention is not the sum of the single intentions of an action's participants.

2.3.2 Margaret Gilbert's contractualist account of participation

Presenting a prominent alternative conception of shared action to Bratman, Gilbert explicitly voices her concerns and criticism towards individualistic accounts, maintaining that a plural subject consists of more than the sum of intentions of the individuals involved. An intentional action, for Gilbert, is an action directed by willingness in accordance with what is done. In her 1989 book *On Social Facts*, Gilbert begins her investigation on what turns such an action into a social or shared action, and successively pursues this task further in the ongoing project she has labelled "Plural Subject Theory" (Gilbert 1989, 2006, 2014). Opposing Bratman, the main focus of her work lies on the emergence of *joint commitment* as a necessary condition for shared actions. Gilbert has objected that reductive approaches like Bratman's miss that any shared activity involves a mutual obligation between participants: each participant is obligated to the others to do their share of the activity, and a one-way withdrawal constitutes a violation of this obligation (Gilbert 1989). She argues that a satisfactory account of these mutual obligations requires that we give up reductive approaches and instead posit a primitive notion of joint commitment. Gilbert defines 'joint commitment' as a kind of commitment of, in this case, the *wills* of the people creating the shared action (2006a: 134), which in her early work she also describes as a "pool of wills" (1989: 197-198.). Such joint commitment can, on this account, only be brought about jointly. In order for it to be shared, according to Gilbert, it must somehow be "fully out in the open" (2006b: 11): Being jointly committed requires some sort of communication that expresses the exchange of commitments: a *social contract*. I will, to emphasize this aspect of her account, call it *contractualist*. In short, Gilbert thinks that something fundamentally new gets added to the picture when an intentional action is shared.

The centerpiece of Gilbert's analysis is the concept of *joint commitment*. Spelled out, its conditions are a set of exclusively conditional personal commitments. According to Gilbert, participants form a plural subject by openly expressing their willingness to be jointly committed to the shared attitude in question towards each other, and therewith motivating the others to do the same. What constitutes the joint commitment in terms of the attitude obtained by a "we" is thus the mutually open expression of each participant's conditional personal commitment. When all participants presume that they perceive and experience the action in question as shared, the action turns into what Gilbert calls (in a

term reminiscent of Durkheim) a *social fact*. Presumptions thus turn into knowledge—common knowledge.

The second chapter of *On Social Facts* is dedicated to the question what it means to do something together “in the strong sense” (Gilbert 1989). Gilbert’s most general formulation of a condition for a shared action, in this strong sense, goes as follows:

For any action, A, such that it is possible for a single person to do A alone, in order for X and Y to do A together in the strong sense, each must have the goal that both X and Y do A and that they do so in another’s company. (1989: 157)

Gilbert elaborates on this posit by stating that “[t]he fact that X and Y share in an action, in the sense I have in mind, is not the same as the fact that what is going on can be described in the sentence of the form ‘X and Y are doing A’” (ibid.: 154). Doing things together “in the strong sense” is more than spatio-temporal contiguity. It cannot be accidental. Rather, it has to be intentional. Gilbert argues that intentions need to be in some way communicated by the actors in order to turn into joint intentionality.

Her 2014 book, *Joint Commitment*, develops this account further, making noteworthy additions to it. In particular, the necessary conditions for a shared intentional action are formulated as follows:

Two or more people are acting together if they are jointly committed to espousing as a body a certain goal, and each one is acting in a way appropriate to the achievement of that goal, where each one is doing this in light of the fact that he or she is subject to a joint commitment to espouse the goal in question as a body. (2014: 34)

Common knowledge has various formulations in the literature, and here Gilbert offers her own. In a nutshell, for Gilbert, it is common knowledge between X and Y that A if X truly believes that A, Y truly believes that A, X truly believes that Y believes that A and so on (2014: 51).

In many cases where Gilbert discusses shared intentional action (for example, in her article on walking together which I will examine in the next chapter), her treatment is based on becoming aware of the intentionality of others by articulating one’s interest in doing something together. The actors share their intentionality by means of language, or so it seems. This can be called a contractualist approach. According to this strand of thinking, actors need to express their willingness to join into this intentionality.

Gilbert puts forward a demanding, normativist conception of the plural subject: When shared action is in play, the agent of intentional activities is a “we”. The basic idea of her theory is that where individuals share an intentional attitude, this attitude cannot be

understood through isolating the attitudes of the particular, participating individuals, but rather ought to be apprehended through the unified collective “pool of wills” (Gilbert 1989; 2000). Her analysis is focused on what she calls a collective “command center” (2000: 5) emerging out of a mutual agreement between the participants, and on the mutual obligations involved in a shared action.

Following this strand of thinking, there is a special kind of normative pressure—in other words: of obligation—arising from participation; the participants feel like they *ought* to perform their part. Gilbert argues that for this type of shared action to come into being, all participants have to normatively expect others to do their parts. The mutual expression of this willingness is then required, so all parties involved know that everyone (a) is willing and (b) agrees upon what it is they are willing to do together in order to form the relevant sense of the first-person plural.

2.3.2.1 Implications for Participant Observation

Gilbert’s account of shared action is a diversion from the standard view. It is not straightforwardly causal as her notion of commitment, which is central to her account, is not causal, but normative. However, her account has causal *consequences*, so perhaps it is suitable for anthropological method building in the ways Bratman’s account is. Let us have a closer look and ask: What would Gilbert’s theory of shared action mean for Participant Observation?

A first, very general point to be made in favor of her plural subject theory is its incorporation of moral obligation, which is a crucial aspect for the conduction of Participant Observation. As we have seen, this account is fundamentally shaped by a guiding sense of explicit commitment. Such a social contract—for instance a promise—causes its normatively provoked consequences, too, but in a less straightforward way than with Bratman. Here, the causal aspect is mediated by mental states such as beliefs or memory. Overall, Gilbert’s emphasis on obligation speaks to moral standards that should be met when conducting fieldwork.

Concerning *context-dependence of action perception*, Gilbert’s account is not silent, but extremely strict considering the knowledge requirements necessary to explicitly commit to a shared action, and also the conceptual overlaps having to be in place *before* a shared action can begin. A preconception of the shared action is part of the content of the mutual obligation that needs to exist in order for an action to be shared “in the strong sense”, as she calls it. For instance, in her 1990 paper “Walking Together. A Paradigmatic Social Phenomenon” (which will be discussed in chapter 3), Gilbert describes walking together from a decisively western point of view and makes it clear throughout the text that Jack and Sue, the protagonists in her example, are both accustomed to those same western

norms. What anthropologists do in the field—for instance walking together with people with different norms relevant for the act of walking together—according to this account, would be likely to not count as a shared action at all. Here, the problem of context-dependence is closely linked to the issue of conceptual convergence, which according to this view must overlap significantly. Gilbert addresses the matter in passing when she acknowledges that

[a]s is well-known to anthropologists in particular, different societies and different sub-groups within societies may and often do operate in terms of different sets of ideas. [...] Some societies think in terms of witchcraft, for instance, others do not. Meanwhile, one may expect some ideas to be common to many cultures, if not all. (2014: 3)

She goes on to remark that the basic idea of doing something together with another person is likely to be common to at least most societies, that the understanding of what it is to do something together is a central terminator of the human condition, and somewhat vaguely adds that the “ideas in this book are of that nature” (ibid.). The examples in the book, however, are all situated in homogenous social settings where their participants share their operating terms and sets of ideas. It seems like Gilbert acknowledges that there are different settings—each of which with their own sets of shared actions—but excludes the possibility of participation in the strong sense across different groups.

Concerning *sharing of non-propositional content*, Gilbert’s account, for the same reason, does not work out for anthropologists because it demands a clear-cut, shared preconception of the shared action in every participating individual that is propositional. According to her view, participation in the field would for the most part not count as a shared action because the shared web of culturally informed, context-specific norms and ways of doing and perceiving specific actions is missing, and the ability to articulate the mutual obligation and willingness to do something together is compromised by habit or linguistic despair I have discussed in chapter 1. Participation would only become an option once the researcher has, in anthropological terms, gone native. This issue becomes clearer as we look at two inherent problems of her account.

2.3.2.2 Gilbert’s first problem: weak individualism

As stated, Gilbert criticizes Bratman for his reductive take on social phenomena and claims that her plural subject theory goes “beyond individualism” (2000: 3). However, Gilbert also argues that a concept of the individual capable of being put in the framework of collective intentionality “does not require for *its* analysis a concept of collectivity” (1989: 435, original emphasis). Investigating Wittgenstein’s “Private Language Argument”, Gilbert objects to

Peter Winch's claim that all meaningful behavior must be social.⁵⁹ Although she explicitly states that "this does not make [her] a strong analytic individualist" (ibid.: 435), she overall argues in favor of the view that to use concepts in a specific way is "solely a matter of how it is with me now. It does not concern how it is or has been or will be with any other person" (ibid.: 95). With this, Gilbert commits to an individualistic view towards natural language, whereby she rejects the position commonly ascribed to Wittgenstein (as discussed in subsection 2.2) that a private language is impossible. For Gilbert, it is conceivable that "a being could use a word in a certain sense even if he has always been entirely alone in the world" (ibid.), therewith claiming that the possession of a concept does not depend on its being shared with others. Her stance is that another individual may well find out what she understands under one description, but her possessing concepts is possible independently of the actual sharing of concepts. Incorporating her account of natural language into her conception of shared action, Gilbert remarks that agents can never fully know if their concepts capture the way things stand in a similar manner. We might thus label her view, in Annette Baier's words, "weak analytic individualism" (Baier 1997: 17), which leaves her account with a problem similar to the one we have already encountered in Bratman.⁶⁰ The problem is to explain how some sort of common knowledge—which is required for an action to be shared *in the strong sense* in Gilbert's conception of shared agency—is supposed to be gained in the first place. Now, from this it does not follow that concepts *cannot* be shared. But it is clear enough that on this account, an explanation of how this should happen will be very different from an explanation coming from someone holding a pluralistic view towards natural language. This individualist aspect of Gilbert's theory is both surprising and problematic. Recalling one of its conditions under which joint commitment to a shared action can arise, the formation of such a social contract can be more or less explicit—like in the case of walking together. However, a shared action seems to require the basic ability to share the exact way in which one commits to it. How exactly are we to bindingly share our commitments, if not with some sort of language?

In order to understand Gilbert's dislike of a non-individualistic account of language—and also the animosity of the standard view against the precedence of the social over the individual—further background on the general drive behind intentional individualism might help. The hostility can be seen as connected to a kind of safety distance towards the idea of collectivistic, or even totalitarian notions of the social. The fear, as Schmid describes it, is of the idea that some sort of 'group mind' seems to be required, "something hovering over and above the minds of the individual involved" (2009: 32). If

⁵⁹ For Gilbert's take on Winch's claim, see Gilbert 1989: 99. Both Gilbert and Winch refer to the following: In response to a question from an imagined interlocutor, Wittgenstein notes: "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?—It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions, but rather in form of life" (PI: §241, original emphasis).

⁶⁰ Baier (1997) has convincingly argued for what she calls an "individualist bias" in Gilbert's view with reference to Gilbert's discussion of analytic individualism in *On Social Facts*.

one conforms to collective accounts of the social, the participating individuals appear to be “no more than organs, i.e. mere instruments, and this seems to contradict our idea of individual intentional autonomy” (ibid.: 33). In effect, many intellectuals felt discomfited with the possibility of a group mind, and it was only recently reconsidered as an angle to make transparent the phenomenon of collective intentionality. Historically, the philosophical idea of a group mind was largely abandoned in the intellectual aftermath of World War II, arguably for fear of reinforcing totalitarian arguments drawing from thoughts that were originally formulated in the absolute idealism of Hegel. ‘Group mind’ is still perceived as a metaphor for a dangerous loss of individual thinking, and therewith also for a dispensation of responsibility of individual group members. Philosophically, Schmid (2009) locates a reason and a consequence for fear of the group mind. According to him, the reason is what Baier (2009) calls the “Cartesian Brainwash”: The error lies in the assumption “[t]hat *cogitationes* require one single *cognizing* mind, one single ego which leaves the collective mind as the only alternative to the individual ego” (ibid.: 156). In the debate, consequentially, this leads to an extreme lashing out in the opposite direction: individualist, reductionist accounts on collective intentionality easily outnumber alternative takes on the matter at stake. Schmid further observes that while Bratman can be counted amongst the “hard-line accounts against the group mind” (ibid.: 34), Gilbert belongs to the camp of philosophers who opt for the “soft way” of “exorcising the alleged specter of the group mind” (ibid.: 33). Accordingly, some sort of collective subject is admitted to the theory. Overall, however, her theory remains consistent with an otherwise thoroughly individualistic conceptual framework in that, as we saw, the plural subject remains solidly grounded in the intentional autonomy of each participating individual by reducing the plural subject to his or her individual reflective self-understanding.

2.3.2.3 Gilbert’s second problem: presupposition of joint commitment

Gilbert’s quest for plausible positive conditions on shared action leads her to a consideration of “particular kinds of things that happen when people do things together” (1989: 156). Considering cases like “traveling together”, “walking together” or “playing tennis together”, it is striking that at all times, some sort of shared conception of the shared activity is already in place. Either they are made explicit in rule governing (like the rules of tennis) or in more fuzzy terms, like customs of “walking together”, which represents an example with a more subtle variation of contractualism. In her above-mentioned paper *Walking Together*, Gilbert illustrates the implications of her theory with the example of two individuals, Jack and Sue, going for a walk together. On this account, such an activity requires that the individuals in question adopt a ‘joint commitment’ which she later defines as a kind of commitment of, in this case, the wills of the two people creating the shared

action (Gilbert 2006: 134). This joint commitment can, as we have seen, only be brought about jointly, and it implies a normative relationship between the parties thereby committed. Gilbert uses this basic structure of joint commitment to define the type of social group she calls 'plural subject'. Such plural subjects, as a particular sort of social group, can then be subjects of intentional states such as acceptance.

Questions arise with regards to the process through which these joint commitments, in Gilbert's hands, are supposed to be brought about. On her account, having joint commitments seems to presuppose some form of collective intentionality. This is obvious in the case of explicit communication, as any communication is a shared action. But, as Schweikard and Schmid point out, the same holds true in those cases in which the agreement is tacit rather than explicit because tacitness, too, implies some form of mutual understanding between the participants. Schweikard and Schmid thus find it plausible to assume that mutual understanding is collectively intentional also when it is tacit. They conclude that if Gilbert's claim is that *all* collective intentionality takes the form of a joint commitment, then her account of the process through which joint commitments are generated presupposes *another* joint commitment. The problem with this is that if individuals, according to Gilbert, already have to be jointly committed in some way in order to *enter* into a joint commitment, what seems to follow is either a vicious circle or an infinite regress (Schweikard and Schmid 2013).

In line with this worry, Michael Rosen has pointed out that it remains an open question how one agent comes to recognize the other's behavior as signifying normatively charged acts of commitment. As Rosen writes: "Granted these resources, the existence of social groups in Gilbert's sense does not seem especially surprising—no more so than the existence of chess pieces, traffic signals or any of those other 'institutional facts' which result from human beings' ability to create normatively structured patterns of behaviour" (1990: 310). The bigger problem will be to explain how we should come to have this capacity in the first place.

2.3.2.4 Conclusion Gilbert

Gilbert's plural subject theory suggests that members of a "we-group" need to create a structure that turns the group into a unified entity in the sense that it is made the subject of attitudes they together accept and are committed to act on. The act of structure creation itself is thought to be already embedded in a specific (western) context which all participants are closely familiar with. The familiarity must be such that the shared action is practiced in a specific way in line with the broader cultural practices of the social setting, and the knowledge of both the shared practice and its context-dependence must be out in the open. This aspect makes Gilbert's plural subject theory a bad fit for anthropologists

unless they are committed to practice Participant Observation until they have fully “gone native”, and embedded themselves, their practices and their language within the cultural norms of the social group they seek to understand. As an ideal, we might find her strict conception of participation helpful to endorse a rigid yard stick for what should count as true participation in anthropological fieldwork.

Gilbert’s account does not explain how we come to have the ability to create normatively structured patterns of behavior in the first place. This does not mean that joint commitment should not play a key role in the explanation of collective intentionality. But it does mean that we are still on the lookout for a theoretical fundament for participation that elaborates on how we come to have shared intentions as out in the open—so that we can, in Bratman’s terms, properly “mesh subplans” and, in line with Gilbert, develop normative expectations towards the other to wanting and doing the same.

2.3.3 G.E.M. Anscombe’s generic account of intention

In the light of the preceding discussion, the question arises what a thoroughly non-individualistic, non-reductive analysis of intentional action could look like—and if indeed it is even possible to generate such an analysis that does not become blurry (like Bratman’s) or else too narrow to include shared actions not fully determined before the joint commitment is made (like Gilbert’s). I believe that it is. In the present section, I will outline what I take to be the most promising candidate for a view of shared action that fulfils these requirements: G.E.M. Anscombe’s treatment of action. I will promote the merits of an Anscombian approach to shared action with regards to its ability to explain, but also restrict cases of participation that often occur as a part of anthropological field work when the mere observer becomes a participant: non-propositional, and context-sensitive cases. I will thus address the overarching question of how to adapt a theory of intention for the exploration of intercultural social settings through the method of Participant Observation.

Anscombe proposed to analyze solitary intentional action as some special sort of movement, a movement that is explained in such a way that the explanation mirrors, as it were, the inner constitution of the movement itself. This sounds Aristotelian in the way I have framed it throughout this chapter, and as we will see, in an important sense it is. According to Anscombe, an intention is not some further factor somehow added to a movement that has its character as a movement anyway, independently of the intention. Rather, intention is the peculiar teleological character that a specific kind of movement—intentional action—exhibits.

In her 1957 book *Intention*, which by now has acquired the status of a modern philosophical classic, Anscombe sets up three conditions for intentional action, given for an *individual*. An action is intentional only if: (a) she who is *J*-ing knows that she is *J*-ing; (b) she knows that she is *J*-ing *not* by observation; and (c) her *J*-ing and knowing so is an

act of practical reasoning.⁶¹ All three conditions are necessary, whereas only condition (c) is sufficient, too. Anscombe's account of solitary intentional action thus relies on a concept of practical knowledge. And so, as I want to show, will an Anscombian approach to *shared* action. In the sense that this theory of intention is suitable for both solitary and shared action, I will refer to it as generic. It is generic in that it allows for an explanation of both solitary and shared action as deriving from the same principle, the principle of intentional action. To follow Anscombe is to understand a shared action not as complex or derivative version of a solitary intentional action, but as grounded in the same principle which is indifferent to the number of participating agents.

Only some of the bodily movements that occur in the world are intentional actions. According to Anscombe, what distinguishes them from mere events or unreflected behavior is the agent's intention. Her book does not explicitly address the question of what a *shared* action is. However, while working through her main arguments on intentional action, I will suggest what such an account, in line with Anscombe, could look like. The task of this section is to make such an account explicit in Anscombe's thinking. It is therefore also slightly longer than the previous sections on Bratman and Gilbert.

As with Bratman's and Gilbert's account, I will start this third inquiry into shared action again with first person intentional action. This has different implications than before. Whereas Bratman's account relied on a previous clarification on the notion of solitary intentional action, and only from there could build up to the more complex case of *shared* action, Anscombe's investigation of intentional action, as I will show, accounts for both solitary and shared action in the same way. For Anscombe, their ground must reside in the nature of action, which stands above the distinction between the one and the many. As this account is generic, it can treat solitary and shared actions as two sub-cases of the same thing. Nevertheless, Anscombe has good reason to restrict her examples to cases described from the first-person perspective. I will return to this point shortly. For now, it suffices to note the starting point here is *solitary intentional action* for different reasons than in the two previous sections.

I begin, as Anscombe does, by considering what it means for an individual to have an intention to do something. We can express this by propounding the following three principles:

- (a) An agent is *J*-ing intentionally only if she knows that she is *J*-ing.
- (b) An agent is *J*-ing intentionally only if she knows that she is *J*-ing *not by* observation.
- (c) An agent is *J*-ing intentionally if and only if she has, and in the relevant situation expresses, practical knowledge of *J*-ing.

⁶¹ Unless stated otherwise, all quotes from Anscombe follow the paragraph numbering of the 1957-edition of *Intention*. Compare §6 for (a), §§ 28-30 for (b) and §§42, 45 and 48 for (c).

(a) Knowledge of *J*-ing

When I say that she who is *J*-ing intentionally knows that she is *J*-ing, I mean the second “she” to be a reflexive pronoun. It signifies that she who knows is identical with her of whom she knows it of. In other words, both occurrences of “she” have the same semantic content.

Now, the word “knows” announces an *intensional* (sic) content: someone may know that X is *J*-ing under one description, but not know it under another. My friend Vuyokazi may know that the man whom she sees crossing the street near her house in Makhanda is smoking a pipe without knowing that this man is Nigel Harris, and thus without knowing that Nigel Harris is smoking a pipe. This shows that the truth value of the sentence, “She knows that X is *J*-ing,” can change as soon as we substitute other expressions of “X” even if they refer to the same subject. Vuyokazi may know that Nigel Harris is smoking a pipe without knowing that the actor who played Giuanin Micheluzzi in Fellini’s *La voce della luna* is smoking a pipe—if, for example, she is ignorant of the fact that Nigel Harris is the actor who played Giuanin Micheluzzi in Fellini’s *La voce della luna*. Vuyokazi, having spent her whole life in Makhanda, might even know that Nigel Harris was born there, too, but would not expect him to return and stroll down High Street. Last but not least, Vuyokazi might be a huge Fellini fan, and might have watched *La voce della luna* many times. Still, she might not recognize the man who is crossing the street as this specific actor, but merely observe a pipe smoking man changing sides on High Street.

I have stated that the second occurrence of “she” in the sentence, “She who is *J*-ing knows that she is *J*-ing,” is a reflexive pronoun. Although this is true, it is not sufficient for this knowledge to be the kind of knowledge that Anscombe has in mind for intentional action, namely self-knowledge. To be that, the pronoun would have to be the special reflexive pronoun that Hector-Neri Castañeda writes as “she*”: it must not merely refer back to the one who is *J*-ing, but must signify that the knowledge she has is knowledge she could express by saying “I am *J*-ing”, or a cognate expression (Castañeda 1966: 130-157). The thing is: it is possible that I refer to myself without knowing that it is me I am referring to. Consider the case of Homer’s Oedipus: Oedipus ordered the murderer of Laius to be banned without knowing that he was referring to himself.⁶² So what distinguishes the first-person singular pronoun ‘I’ from the third person perspective?

To begin with, the functioning of “I” is not to be equated with that of a name, a description or an identifying singular term. In Gottlob Frege’s terms, what is relevant here is its *sense* and not its *meaning*. The Fregean *sense* of a referring expression is the manner in which one refers to an object. Its *meaning* is its referent: the object to which one refers in using it. As the Oedipus-example illustrates, one can refer to the same object in different

⁶² Sebastian Rödl (2007: 1) begins his inquiry of self-consciousness with this example.

ways. Oedipus can be referred to also as “the murderer of Laius” by those who know that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius.

Frege states that “a” and “b” vary in sense if and only if “Fa” and “Fb” express different thoughts (Frege 1892: 32). This means that if I think *Fa*, I do not necessarily also think *Fb* if there is room for *not* knowing that *Fa* is identical with *Fb*. Thus, the Fregean distinction between sense and meaning relates to the distinction between referring to oneself *per accidens* in the following way: in Oedipus’ uttering, “I” and “the murderer of Laius” have the same meaning, but not the same sense.

Anscombe is aware of this issue, and treats it in her paper “The First Person” (1975), where she describes how I can use a name in a way that the one I refer to is myself. She shows that this does not mean that this name bears the same sense as “I”:

Yet we are inclined to think that “It’s the word each one uses in speaking of himself” explains what “I” names, or explains “I” as a ‘referring expression’. It cannot do so if “He speaks of himself” is compatible with ignorance and we are using the reflexive pronoun, in both cases, in the ordinary way. (1975: 46)

This is to say that the above investigation of “I” is concerned with its sense rather than its meaning. What we want to know is *how* we refer with it and not *what* we refer to. Sebastian Rödl formulated this by saying that she who knows that she is *J*-ing is the same as she who is *J*-ing, not “*per accidens*, but [...] in virtue of the manner in which she knows it” (Rödl 2007: 19). The same thought is expressed by Anscombe when she states that “to say that a man knows he is [*J*-ing] is to give a description of what he is doing *under which* he knows it” (§6). Thus, the knowledge in question is not distinguished by the object known, but by the *manner of knowing*.

As things stand, we cannot yet give a positive account of this special manner of knowing that is in play when someone is doing something intentionally. What we *can* say is that it is *not* receptive knowledge, for it is not knowledge one acquires by being affected by its objects.

(b) Knowledge without observation

A further necessary condition of the special knowledge we have of our own intentional actions, according to Anscombe, is that we know what we are doing “without observation” (§§8, 28-30). The knowledge we have of our intentional actions is thus not receptive knowledge. It is not knowledge one acquires by being affected by its objects because normally, she who is affected is not the same as she who affects her. This is to say that if a subject is conscious of an object by being affected by it, then the conscious subject and the object of which she is conscious *may be identical*—but if they are, then this is so

accidentally, and not in virtue of the manner in which the subject is conscious of the object, namely by affection. Thus, sensory affection cannot provide a subject with a conception of what affects her that represents it as the subject who suffers the affection. To give an example: Whereas I might only discover that I have been scratching my head by hearing the sound I am making, I do not need to infer from any kind of sense evidence what it is I am doing intentionally. Even in the case of a habitual action like my occasional head scratching, I will be capable of reporting a correct description of my intentional actions without the need to monitor my own movements in the way a third party would have to.⁶³ Anscombe insists that as long as things go as planned, the agent's non-observational belief about what she is doing amounts to knowledge of what actually happens—and not merely of what she is trying to do. Anscombe's wording is:

I [...] came up with the formula: I do what happens. That is to say, when the description of what happens is the very thing which I should say I was doing, then there is no distinction between my doing and the thing's happening. (§29, original emphasis)

Another way to put this point is to say that someone acts intentionally if and only if a certain sense of the question "Why?" can be applied to her action. Anscombe asks: "What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not?" and promptly answers that intentional actions are the actions to which a certain sense of the question "Why?" is given application:

[T]he sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting. But this is not a sufficient statement, because the question 'What is the relevant sense of the question "Why?"' and 'What is meant by "reason for acting"?' are one and the same. (§5)

What is this special sense of "Why?" and what does it mean for it to have application? One way to elucidate the relevant sense of this question is to say that it requests the agent to give reasons for her action. If we ask Vuyokazi why she is rummaging around in her bag, she might answer that (i) she is looking for matches. If we were to query this further, she might say that (ii) she is doing this because she wants to light Nigel's pipe. The answers (i) and (ii) represent an interlaced set of explanatory relations. Her rummaging is explained with reference to her intention to light Nigel's pipe. In other words, the *reason* Vuyokazi is rummaging is her intention to light Nigel's pipe. All actions leading to her lighting Nigel's pipe share an explanatory unity: they are to be explained as phases of lighting Nigel's pipe. If Vuyokazi does not find her matches, she might run over to the next spaza shop, buy

⁶³ I here appeal to Sarah K. Paul's interpretation of Anscombe's notion of *knowledge without observation*. For a rich discussion of the status of non-observational knowledge in Anscombe, see Paul (2009).

matches and run back to where she left Nigel. If we asked her “Why are you running to the spaza?”, the relevant sense of “Why?” is addressed by Vuyokazi if her answer is not “because I need to buy matches”, but “because I want to light Nigel’s pipe”.⁶⁴

We can put this differently by saying that all actions leading to lighting Nigel’s pipe are *not accidental*: Vuyokazi is doing all of this precisely *because* she intends to light Nigel’s pipe. The actions are thus not randomly connected, but relate to each other non-arbitrarily as all aiming towards the same end.

We have now in view the two first interrelated, necessary conditions for a solitary intentional action in accordance with Anscombe’s views. Both introduce further questions: There is a special kind of knowledge that we have of our intentional actions. So far, we know that this knowledge is special and that it is not merely knowledge by observation. Anscombe critically takes into consideration that

if there are two knowledges—one by observation, the other in intention—then it looks as if there must be two objects of knowledge; but if one says the objects are the same, one looks hopelessly for the different mode of contemplative knowledge in acting, as if there were a very queer and special sort of seeing eye in the middle of the acting. (§32)

Part of the point here is that if one only looks for special kind of *theoretical* (that is *contemplative*) knowledge in acting, then this knowledge must be such that it is in accordance with facts. These facts must be “prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge” (§32). But this is not how Anscombe thinks knowledge of an intentional action comes into being, for this knowledge is not *of* the action as it were if it were merely observed, but *from within* the action that is only intentional insofar as it is known. This special kind of knowledge she is after, the kind of knowledge that enables one to explain not only solitary, but also shared intentional action, is what needs further elucidation. What does Anscombe mean when she says that the knowledge someone has of her intentional action is “practical knowledge”?

(c) Practical knowledge of *J*-ing

(a) propounded that she who is doing something intentionally only does it intentionally if she knows that she does. There is thus, in the case of intentional action, no such thing as the object of knowledge without it being known. As Anscombe suggests, the knowledge we have of our intentional actions is not knowledge that *derives* from its objects, but

⁶⁴ Of course, we can imagine further ends for Vuyokazi to light Nigel’s pipe. The relevant sense I am addressing here is the one she herself has in mind as a main end as she is rummaging in her bag or as she is running over the street, and surely as she is lighting Nigel’s pipe. This main end is to light Nigel’s pipe.

knowledge from which its object is *derived*. Let me reconsider her wording I have already quoted above:

I do what happens. That is to say, when the description of what happens is the very thing which I should say I was doing, then there is no distinction between my doing and the thing's happening. (§29, original emphasis)

Considering (c), we can now more clearly see what this statement amounts to: The knowledge Anscombe has in mind cannot be theoretical, contemplative, but it has to be practical. It is knowledge that is not receptive, but productive of its objects. Since the knowledge in question is knowledge without which the action itself cannot be, the power of action must provide for it. Laurence calls attention to the significance of this, and suggests considering the connection Anscombe finds between the rational order present in intentional action and the practical syllogism. Following Laurence, what emerges in Anscombe's account as a series of answers to the question "Why?"—asked in the above noted, special sense—could also be interpreted "as a practical syllogism where 'the premises shew what good, what use, the action is', thereby displaying the rational order in action as the product of the practical reason of the agent so acting" (Laurence 2011: 285; inner quote from Anscombe 1995: 5).

Anscombe states that what appears in her account as an interwoven set of answers to the question "Why?" could, understood in the relevant sense, just as well be laid out as an act of *practical reasoning* (§33). We can now see why Laurence calls this "the heart of her account" (2011: 285). In condition (c) we find full expression of what was only partially visible in condition (a): having practical knowledge of J-ing is the only manner of J-ing intentionally. Condition (a) is thus necessary but not sufficient. We can also see why condition (b), stating that the relevant knowledge is non-observational, is only necessary, but not sufficient for intentional action. For it shows what is implicit in condition (c), but only *ex negativo*.⁶⁵ Conditions (a), (b) and (c) are thus not to be understood as three independently standing conditions of an intentional action, but as an asymmetrically related set of conditions: condition (c), properly understood, *contains* both conditions (a) and (b), because practical knowledge is knowledge and practical knowledge is knowledge without observation. It is this that makes condition (c) the heart of Anscombe's account: it is a necessary and sufficient condition for intentional action.

This explanation of the knowledge of someone's intentional action as practical knowledge amounts to the declaration of a unity of being and thinking: Within an act of practical reasoning (i.e. within a practical syllogism), being and thinking are not yoked together by some external thing—as though there is some sort of mechanism that joins the

⁶⁵ I therewith leave it open if there is non-observational knowledge that is not practical.

two together. Rather, an act of practical reasoning is a way of being to which thinking is internal. Anscombe remarks that

[a]lthough the term ‘practical knowledge’ is most often used in connexion with specialised skills, there is no reason to think that this notion has application only in such contexts. ‘Intentional action’ always presupposes what might be called ‘knowing one’s way about’ the matters described in the description under which an action can be called intentional, and this knowledge is exercised in the action and is practical knowledge. (§48)

Recall my preliminary remark that Anscombe has different reasons for starting with a first person singular formulation for her examples than Bratman. We can now see why this must be so. For this practical knowledge must be practical *self*-knowledge first. As Rödl puts it, a second person thought represents its objects “as *the kind of subjects one knows oneself to be*. And self-knowledge is, fundamentally, articulated in unmediated first person thought; something is self-knowledge only if it is knowledge of the object of such thoughts” (2007: 172-173, original emphasis). Accordingly, to think of another subject means to deploy concepts under which the thinker thinks herself in first person thought. When we ascribe intentional action to someone, we therewith ascribe self-knowledge to this other person. Just as my intentional actions are a manifestation of my self-knowledge—for when I do something intentionally, I know that I am doing it—so your intentional actions are a manifestation of your self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is neither empirically given nor a priori, but becomes available to the knower only qua agent (through her doing, through her purposive projects). In Michael Thompson’s words, entertaining a second person thought means “to represent the object of thought as capable of entertaining the same thought in first-person form” (2008: 3).⁶⁶ To think of another subject means to deploy concepts under which the thinker brings herself in first person thought.

We know about our intentional actions that they exhibit a causality of reason. In the form of a practical syllogism, such an act can take this form:

P1: I intend to *J*

P2: To *J*, I have to *K*

C: I have to *K*

Harking back to Vuyokazi’s intention to light Nigel’s pipe, which is here represented by *J*, we can imagine many more things she needs to do in order to *J*—like *K*, *L* or *M*. Knowing

⁶⁶ Thompson’s conception of second person thought is guided by the idea that some of our main concepts under investigation—‘action’, ‘practice’ and ‘second person thought’—are not to be elucidated through experience, but have the status of *a priori* concepts.

P1 and P2, Vuyokazi knows *K spontaneously* by being the subject of her self-conscious act (Rödl 2007: 173). The order of the practical syllogism, of Vuyokazi's thinking about what to do, thus is the order of action explanation—in our example: of explaining why Vuyokazi is *K-ing*.

Now, since her own acts cannot sustain a different metaphysical nature from the acts of Nigel (or anyone else's), a shared action requires the thinking of the other person as entertaining the same form of thinking. We can rephrase this by saying that the objects of Vuyokazi's receptive faculty are *spatio-temporal*. If Nigel's were of a different form, it would be impossible for Vuyokazi to apply her way of representing objects to his action, and it would thus be impossible to ascribe any kind of action—shared or not—to Nigel (or anyone else) in an intelligible way.

By now we have seen that the two first conditions for an action to be considered intentional appear to be interrelated. The knowledge we have of our intentional action is *self-knowledge* and therefore *not* knowledge by observation. It is *self-knowledge* in that it is the manner of knowing that it is knowledge we have of ourselves in acting intentionally. It is *non-observational* (that is not theoretical, contemplative) *knowledge* in that she who is acting intentionally is capable of reporting a correct description of her intentional actions without needing to monitor her own movements in the way a third party would have to. In this we came to see the relation of conditions (a) and (b) with condition (c)—that the special kind of knowledge we are after is *practical knowledge*. According to Anscombe, the knowledge we have of our intentional actions is not knowledge that *derives* from its objects, but knowledge from which its object is *derived*. In this, it cannot be theoretical or contemplative, but must be *practical*.

We are now prepared to consider an approach to shared action in line with the form of explanation that characterizes solitary intentional action as followed in the previous section. As stated, my aim is both to show how to render Anscombe's account of intentional action useful for any action that falls under her description of intentional action, and to show how Anscombe's principle not only encloses the difference of individual and shared action but presents it as having the same *form*, or *mode*, of thinking (as opposed to Bratman's account where what is shared is the *content* of thinking). This will emerge as we reconsider (c), Anscombe's only condition for intentional action that is both necessary and sufficient:

(c) An agent is *J-ing* intentionally if and only if she has, and in the relevant situation expresses, practical knowledge of *J-ing*.

Applied to *shared* action, the principle takes the following form:

(c') Agents are *J*-ing together if and only if they have, and in the relevant situation express, practical knowledge of *J*-ing.⁶⁷

Recalling the Nigel-and-Vuyokazi example, Vuyokazi only lights Nigel's pipe intentionally if she knows that this is what she is doing. We can apply this observation to shared action. Let us consider this act of pipe lighting a shared action by assuming that it consists in Vuyokazi holding a lit match just above the tobacco of Nigel's pipe while Nigel drags on its mouthpiece. Inserting the example into (c'), Vuyokazi and Nigel both know that she is lighting his pipe.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Vuyokazi, being a huge fan of Fellini's work, may be lighting Nigel's pipe whilst having no idea that he is the one who acted in *La voce della luna*. She might have dreamed of the chance to meet someone who has acted for Fellini, in which case she will be thrilled to find out that she did. And it does not end here. Nigel could be of the opinion that he must never accept a lighting of his pipe from a fan, in which case he will be distressed to find out that Vuyokazi is.

When I set up condition (c'), I did not mean it to be vulnerable to such counterexamples. I intended the reflexive pronoun that figures in (c') to be of a special kind. What Nigel and Vuyokazi know, in virtue of one lighting the other's pipe, Vuyokazi would express by saying "I am lighting your pipe"; Nigel by saying, "You are lighting my pipe". Here we have expressions of self-knowledge, common practical self-knowledge.

This means that condition (c'), is not an expansion or generalization (although it looked like one at first), but a variation of Anscombe's principle, which has a higher generality than it so far appeared. Its object is action, no matter whether its subject is put into singular or plural. The ground on which this principle rests is not limited to the singularity of the subject. Another way to put this is to say that shared action is action and thus partakes of its nature. This means that the action is *known* by whoever partakes in the action.

With Anscombe, we can now make the following assumptions for *shared* action: A shared action involves doing something together intentionally as well as sharing at least one intention that motivates the action.⁶⁹ An action is intentional insofar as with its ends, the agent can *explain* the action—the explanation for the action can thus be given with reference to its ends. We generally perform shared actions for shared intentions, but not all intentions for a shared action must be mutual. Shared agency requires at least one shared

⁶⁷ I thank Sebastian Rödl for sharing with me that at the 2001 conference on Collective Intentionality in Leipzig, Georg Meggle propounded a version of my (a), applied to shared action. Meggle's (a') went along the following lines: Agents are *J*-ing together only if they know that they are *J*-ing together. It was the first part of his observation that, while this principle cannot serve as a definition for shared action, it specifies a *criterion of adequacy* of a definition in that it shows that a definition of shared action is incomplete if it fails to entail that those who are acting together know that they are. This led me to do the same for (c).

⁶⁸ Notice that this works without observation: Both of them knowing that what is going on is that Vuyokazi is lighting Nigel's pipe means that they do not incorporate the possibility that, for example, Vuyokazi just wants to use up her matches and happens to do that by what looks like intentionally lighting Nigel's pipe.

⁶⁹ Michael Schmitz (2013), who has developed a refined conception of practical knowledge, argues for a similar account, namely that collective self-consciousness is constitutive for collective intentionality.

end, which can also be identical with the action itself: We, you and I, go for a walk together because we both intend to go for a walk together, regardless of your further intention to get some exercise and my further intention to get some sun. What matters is that we both *know* that we are going for a walk together. You and I can thus both answer questions like “Why are you ambling next to each other?” or “Why are you keeping track with the other?” by giving an answer we can agree on: “because we are walking together”.

Those who think of each other as “You and I” are, if they are sharing an action, thinking of themselves as “We”. In this sense, a shared action, like any intentional action, is something we are *aware* of doing.

Anscombe’s conception of intentions describes a manner of being: a being that is thinking. For Anscombe, an intention is the peculiar teleological character that a certain kind of movement—intentional action—exhibits. The purposiveness of these movements is, as it were, constitutive of their being the movements they are; there would not be that sort of movement without it. Hence, this purposive ordering is there only in virtue of being known by the agent. The agent’s self-knowledge, what Anscombe takes to be *practical knowledge*, makes intentional action what it is. It does so in two ways: Both the intentional character and the existence of intentional actions derive from this special sort of self-knowledge that agents have. As Anscombe puts it, with allusion to Thomas Aquinas, “practical knowledge is ‘the cause of what it understands’, unlike ‘speculative’ knowledge, which is ‘derived from the objects known’” (§48).⁷⁰

There are two ways to understand Thomas’s doctrine embraced by Anscombe that intention is the cause of what it understands. According to the causal view presented by Taylor, intention is the cause, but not itself part of the action. There is the intention to *J*, and then, in effect, *J*-ing is instigated. According to the qualitative view, by contrast, the intention *is* the beginning of a shared action and thus a constitutive part of intention rather than what precedes it.

I take Anscombe here to vindicate the Aristotelian view that action itself is the conclusion of practical thought. In Aristotle’s *De Anima*, intentions (as *orexis*) are things that move their creator, the agent. In this sense, intending is not just a form of passive perception or readiness to perceive, but is rather the beginning attention—and a form of movement. The Aristotelian view (in *De Anima*, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *De Motu Animalum*) I take to be that action itself is the conclusion of practical thought that begins with intention. With Anscombe, intention marks the beginning of the movement which is described as an action. This appears to be in line with Aristotle’s model of animal locomotion, which thinks intention as awareness and a form of movement in itself. By taking intention to be not just the cause of what it understands (in the sense that

⁷⁰ The inner brackets refer to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, Q3, art. 5, obj. 1.

intention comes first and only then movement kicks in), but in the sense that they are the beginning of the movement, intentions become the part of the action rather than their preceding cause.

A similar account is possible for shared intentional action. The account does not identify a further factor that binds individual movements together, thereby turning them into an intentional action that is shared. Rather, it describes the inner constitution of what is one movement from the start. A shared intention is, according to this account, not a complex of individual attitudes that are separate from the movements they cause and guide. Rather, it is the teleological structure of this single movement. It is the manner in which the different bits that each of the participants contribute over time hang together, how all of them contribute to the realization of the *shared goal*. In other words, a shared intention is the special way a certain sort of movement, a shared intentional action, is real, is being performed, rather than some intention or complex of intentions distinct from the movement. To be sure, this special way of performing a movement depends on the *common knowledge* of all participants. It is, again, *practical* knowledge: It is *shared* practical knowledge which makes shared activity what it is. Here, like in the case of solitary intentional action, such knowledge is the cause of what it understands. But this time, it is shared knowledge, something all participants have together, and no one has all on her own.

2.3.3.1 Implications for Participant Observation

In Anscombe, the phenomenal level of participation is central to the constitution of the knowledge gain, which, on the face of it, fits the bill of anthropological inquiry.

The distinct consequences for an account of Participant Observation become apparent when we look at how this theory behaves when confronted with the challenges of context dependence: An Anscombian notion of shared action allows for the intention to emerge in the action itself, but only once enough context is given. In this sense, an Anscombian conceptualization of participation is strict in just the right way. It demands contextual knowledge of the broader situation of a given action for the shared action to count as intentional. This contextual knowledge, in turn, is not a merely contemplative product of action that comes after the shared practice, but it emerges as part of the practice itself.

As discussed, anthropologists seek to find out what it is to *J*, not to assume that *J*-ing is an already clear, charted, shared concept. An Anscombian account puts welcome pressure on the question of how deeply to immerse oneself into the field. In order to be able to answer the question “Why?” in the relevant way, the researcher sharing in an action with her informant, to be in line with an Anscombian view, would have to make it a priority, a main intention, to align her intentions with those of the research partner, which are not

primarily linked to an academic purpose. The anthropologist, who at the beginning of her fieldwork has not much more than the intention to participate, yet still lacks the habitual skills to perform a given shared task in accordance in the local, context-sensitive ways, will have to try, time and again, to *J*, and gradually build, through practice, the knowledge to truly participate.

For my extension of the theory into an account of shared action, the question “Why?” would demand an answer at least conceivable to all participants as plausibly describing a shared intention. While in many cases, silence is an adequate expression of intention, it could be a worthwhile addition to participatory methodology to every now and then throw in versions of the Anscombian question “Why?”. This could function as a yardstick for the anthropologist unsure of her level of immersion: As long as her answer to the question “Why?” is “because we are doing Participant Observation”—which is, at least in most cases, not the answer the research partner would give—she is still underway.⁷¹ Concerning *context-dependence of action perception*, then, this account allows for context to co-constitute the shared action itself because it is *in* the context-specific, unique action that the intention and knowledge thereof lies. Nigel and Vuyokazi imagine each other as entertaining the same form of thought, which allows them to recognize each other as self-conscious beings intentionally doing their part in the shared action that is lighting Nigel’s pipe.

It is worth pausing here to closely look at Anscombe’s condition of non-observational knowledge. We are, after all, looking for a theory that helps conceptualizing Participant Observation. Recalling the discussion from chapter 1 about the distinct functions of observation, we can see how the demand for participatory knowledge to be non-observational actually fits the ultimate goal of Participant Observation to understand what it is to *J* in a specific context. Remember: There are two ways to understand observation in the context of fieldwork: Mere observation of other people without contextual knowledge and observation that is a result of contextual knowledge. The former would mean a confinement to interpretation of observable *behavior*, which goes against the fundamental idea of Participant Observation as framed in chapter 1. The latter, attentive observation, as I have argued, can only come into being through immersive practice itself. This kind of observation presupposes attention to what matters in a specific context, and attention “to the right thing” presupposes itself an ability to recognize what matters. I have called this ability attentiveness, but in Anscombian terms we could also call it observatory power. This power to observe, then, is what is gained by non-observational knowledge.

⁷¹ In the chapters 4 and 5 I will turn to the specific question of what it means in the case of walking together to answer the question “Why?” in the relevant sense.

An Anscombian account of shared action allows for non-propositional knowledge to be shared insofar as it is *in the action* that the knowledge of what it is we are doing presents itself. According to Anscombe, the intentional action and the intention in which one acts are not connected in a causal way (as with the standard, causal view), but *are* the same event. In the action, no particular concept or proposition has to be involved that ties everything together or that makes the execution possible—we simply act. This aspect is attractive for anthropologists, who seek to gain non-propositional knowledge through participation, often in their research partners' everyday action, where much depends on skills and, to put it in terms of the anthropology of the body, habitus—which in turn is linked to attention and non-observational knowledge: We pay less attention to habitualized action than to the first execution of a task, where in some sense we might even actively observe our own actions as we execute them. Think of a dance studio full of mirrors. Habitual actions, by contrast, may have wandered into the non-propositional realm of thought of the anthropologist's research partner, or have never left it. The problem is that knowledge of an action, as we have seen, might be non-propositional because it is habitual, and habitual action might be executed without awareness. Now, as Anscombe puts it, the question "Why?" can be "refused application by the answer 'I was not aware I was doing that'" (§6). Anscombe here begins to link the idea of conscious action to the idea of intentional action. Knowledge without observation—that is the kind of knowledge about one's intentional actions the question "Why?" can be successfully posed to—implies awareness or being conscious of what it is one is doing in some ways. An intentional act, in Anscombe's hands, is a self-conscious act. The question then is if the structure of consciousness is throughout propositional. An analysis of the structure of consciousness would exceed the scope of this thesis. I will confine myself to the claim that there is no obvious reason to think that conscious acts *have to* take the form of a proposition. With regard to the question "Why?": One needs to be able to answer it in *some* way, and the examples Anscombe gives take propositional form, but one could think of other forms that would not violate any conditions of the account. The Anscombian requirements for shared intentional action are that the action is knowable by its participants without observation, and that this knowledge is practical. Knowledge without observation and practical knowledge can be non-propositional knowledge, so on the face of it there is no problem with that. With regard to conceptual convergence, the account does not explicitly state the necessity for this kind of overlap. The question "Why?" does not demand all participants to actually give the same answer, but only that they could understand the other participant's answer to also describe a fitting intention for the shared action. Conceptual convergence might be compromised here, but is not a fundamental problem for the application of the account. Concerning inherent problems of such an account, let me highlight one crucial aspect.

2.3.3.2 Anscombe's problem: the quality of common practical knowledge

The notion of common knowledge that is crucial for all three accounts remains somewhat obscure with regards to its structure and how it is established among us. I have offered an extension to Anscombe's self-knowledge view that does not come without explanatory gaps itself. My aim was to sketch a view of common knowledge that is practical. It is clear that on Bratman's account, common knowledge cannot be practical because that would undermine the reductive ambition of his project. For Gilbert, the preconception of what is shared must precede the joint action, for without it there can be no joint commitment. Intention, therefore, too cannot emerge in the action, but is contemplative in nature. Now, one is inclined to ask, must common knowledge be practical in order to be adequately explained? After all, there are available accounts of common knowledge that do not make it practical.⁷² It would be well possible for Bratman or Gilbert to appeal to an account along these lines to shed light on the notion of common knowledge that they employ.

This might be so, and I do not deny that such an account could lead to an explanation of common knowledge as *theoretical* knowledge. My point is just this: It would be something Bratman would have to do *additionally* to his present account, and it would have to fit with all of his other established conditions, whereas Anscombe's account is self-contained in this respect. "Anscombe's problem", then, is not a concrete problem of her account, but a blurriness with regards to how the self-knowledge account exactly spells out in plural. Since my concern is with Participant Observation, and since significant parts of this book to follow will deal with empirical manifestations of participation, I will leave this question open for now, for I seek to answer in not in the philosophical, but in the anthropological framework.

2.3.3.3 Conclusion Anscombe

An Anscombian account of shared action puts constructive pressure on all challenges the anthropological method of Participant Observation is faced with. It demands the knowledge gained through participation to be potentially put into words—which at some point the anthropologist needs to do anyways. It also demands the shared action's main intention to be shared, which means that the anthropologist must put as aside, as she is participating, her aims to produce academic content, and focus on the quality of the action itself. For an Anscombian account allows the main intention of the action to be the shared

⁷² See most famously David Lewis (1969), whose notion of common knowledge was acknowledged by Gilbert as having made a strong impact on her work (Gilbert 1989: ix).

action itself, practiced with another self-conscious being in mutual recognition of each other.

Reconnecting with Taylor's idea of a qualitative view, we can here see its quality in this Anscombian account of shared action. Recalling a core trait of the qualitative view: In order to recognize the other as being capable of doing something intentionally at all, we have to recognize her as another self-conscious being. In this, a theory of action is a theory of self-consciousness. What is *shared* within a shared action is not the content of the intention (like within the reductive, causal view), but the *form* of thought. In shared action, what is shared is the knowledge of what is done together. Accordingly, solitary intentional action and shared action are appliances of the same form of practical thought. This common form of practical thought realizes itself in both solitary and shared intention. The common principle on which both an explanation for solitary and shared intentional action rests has a higher generality in that its object is action *simpliciter*, be its subject one or many. With this, solitary action and shared action are put on equal footing. Thus, the qualitative view includes action that is irreducibly collective and cannot be reduced to or analyzed as a set of actions that are solitary. We find in the qualitative view, and hence in Anscombe, *one* principle which is above the distinction of singular and plural. Its expression deploys a variable whose values are indiscriminately singular and plural: 'Nigel', and 'Vuyokazi', and 'Nigel and Vuyokazi'.

2.4 Conclusion

Participant Observation is, in many ways, a special case for philosophy of action. We have considered the standard view paradigmatically represented by Bratman's reductive individualism, a contractualist version of a non-reductive account that is individualist with regard to ordinary language defended by Gilbert, and finally a consistently non-reductive, non-individualist, generic account drawing on Anscombe's conception of intention.

We have then seen how Bratman and Gilbert belong to the causal family of views: Bratman in a straightforward way, as he openly defends an individualist, reductive approach paradigmatic for the causal view; Gilbert in a softer, more tacit way, as her individualist approach towards ordinary language presses her contractualist account to separate the action from its causes—the intention—in the way the causal view prescribes it. Overall, the causal view encounters difficulties when it comes to explaining the shift from individual to shared agency because it is unclear how the *content* of the intentions of the individuals involved is shared.

The qualitative view, by contrast, needs no additional explanation of what it is to do something together because the *form* of first person thought is the same as the form of

a second person thought. This family of views, as we have seen, is paradigmatically presented in Anscombe. According to her, if an event is an intentional action, then it has an intended means-end articulation relevant to its representation and to understanding its grounds.

In Bratman, there is an explanatory step to be made from individual to shared action and his theory seeks to examine and explain that very step. His conception of 'common knowledge' remains blurry. With reductive and individualistic presumptions that intentional actions are a special sort of events, Bratman implicitly opts for an explanation of intentional action as an act of theoretical reasoning. Gilbert's conception of collective knowledge remains blurry for slightly different reasons. It seems that rather than explaining how two individuals get to access and add into what Gilbert calls a 'pool of wills', this pool needs to preexist in order for the two to enter it.

One of her most well-known examples for how this works is the mentioned paper on walking together. It will be one connecting point to the next chapter, which introduces *walking together* as an interesting example for a shared action in that it has caught the attention of both anthropology and philosophy. The chapter will be about the different meanings and uses of the practice in the two disciplines, and the role *ideal* notions of an action play versus their *real* execution in philosophy and anthropology respectively. Philosophers seek to define ideal notions of walking together while for the anthropologist, walking together takes many real forms which, if part of an ethnography, must each be embedded in an understanding of a broader context. But picking a shared action as specific as *walking together* for this investigation can also be given independent of the fact that both anthropology and philosophy happen to be interested in this shared practice: From chapter 1 we know that Participant Observation means to live together with a group of people for an extended period of time and join into their everyday lives to get an idea of this broader context. This could mean that for an anthropologist, the *J* in *J*-ing together as introduced in chapter 2 would have to be as broad as *living* together. The question guiding us through the next chapters is: how general does the content of *J* have to be if context is to be taken seriously? It seems that Participant Observation demands that it must be the very general *living together* that constitutes the sub-plans within a specific shared action. My claim will be that the act of walking together can function as an *entrance point* into an understanding of broader notions of *J*-ing together of a specific cultural group, but that it can also, after long-time field research, be understood as a part of a whole. The act of walking together, which will be the topical focus of the next chapter, helps to co-build, together with one's research partner, points of commonalities and bonds of trust I will discuss in chapter 5, after all my empirical work is on the table. In the end, this broader knowledge of context will lead to a deeper understanding of the initial act, the act of walking together, which can then, in context, be understood and done together properly. This is a

hermeneutic notion of understanding. My claim renders a qualitative, Anscombian notion of shared action the most helpful: it allows for the intention to emerge *in the action* itself, but only once enough *context* is given.

Chapter 3

Walking Together: From an Ideal to the Real

Where does it start? Muscles tense. One leg a pillar, holding the body upright between the earth and sky. The other a pendulum, swinging from behind. Heel touches down. The whole weight of the body rolls forward onto the ball of the foot. The big toe pushes off, and the delicately balanced weight of the body shifts again. The legs reverse position. It starts with a step and then another step and then another step and then another that add up like taps on a drum to a rhythm, the rhythm of walking.

— Rebecca Solnit (2014: 3)

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will continue the work that was begun in the previous chapter, by taking up the outstanding methodological challenge against Participant Observation. This is the challenge which I have labelled “the tension between the particular and the general”. The problem, as I have framed it, is this: Anthropologists who conduct Participant Observation attribute primary value to their immediate experiences of participating. But if a particular experience is only valued in its uniqueness, the worry arises that anthropological inquiry amounts to a compilation of anecdotes, lacking the generalizability of genuinely scientific claims. If, alternatively, the particular becomes a springboard for general reflections, a few unique incidents will have to support the weight of generalizations about entire societies or cultures—which they seemingly cannot do. In short, it seems that generalization is crucial to the anthropologist’s aims of discovery, but cannot be justified by the anthropologist’s methods. How can anthropology turn seemingly anecdotal evidence into general claims about cultures, peoples or geographical areas?

The philosophical resources that were used in the previous chapter to address the other two methodological challenges seemingly do not help us with this question. The tension between the particular and the general persists regardless of what one thinks it is to participate. Nevertheless, the aim of this chapter is to suggest that promising avenues towards a resolution can be found by drawing on philosophy—albeit in a very different way. Whereas the last chapter took advantage of the philosophical method of conceptual analysis to gain a clearer view of participation, we will now explore a core trait of that method to ease the tension between the particular and the general. That trait is idealization.

In contrast to anthropology, philosophical methodology prioritizes the general from the get-go. Philosophers reach general claims by using idealized examples—usually examples they have worked hard to make significant for all occurrences of the phenomenon under investigation. Through understanding how philosophical idealizations work, and where they go astray, we can learn about different modes of getting from the particular to the general—and back. My aim in this chapter is to offer a critique of philosophical methodology that can be applied to anthropological research.

My discussion of philosophical idealization (in section 3.2) will first identify three ways of framing idealization. I will then focus on a specific, idealized example of shared action: walking together. Many philosophers, including Margaret Gilbert, refer to walking together as a paradigmatic example of an easily understood and executed shared action (Cohen and Levesque 1990, Gilbert 1990, Schmid 2005, O'Connor and Sandis 2012). It is drawn upon as a “simple” or “basic” thought experiment to highlight certain aspects of a theory—where these terms denote an action that everyone understands in the same way. Because of its “basicness”, the activity of walking together is supposed to be a textbook example of a shared action with the appropriate generality to be suitable for drawing generalized conclusions about the conceptual realm of participation. For me, this example will function as a case study in philosophical idealization that puts to work the previously established distinction between three forms of idealization.

The critique I will offer of philosophical idealization (which I present in section 3.3) is importantly different from the critique that is standardly made by anthropologists. The standard critique, as we have seen, is that the use of highly generalized examples in philosophy cannot yield any conclusions of value regarding what human cultures are actually like. Anthropology has become weary of such idealized, generalized considerations as the philosopher offers, regarding them as oblivious to cultural and historical context. Participation as practiced in Participant Observation is an empirical tool rather than a conceptual one, leading (in the ideal case) to practical knowledge of what a specific group of people do and think—and, to some degree, why. Generalizations are permissible only on the ground of thorough documentation of particular facts of past and present lives, and their contextualization in the broader framework of the particular fact.

Whilst I think there is much that is right in these criticisms, my aim in this chapter is to offer a different one. My critique culminates in the idea that the examples used by philosophers *really are not* general in the ways they are claimed to be. I show that idealized examples of walking together contain hidden forms of context-dependence that are not acknowledged. For example, they assume a shared understanding amongst its participants of what it is to walk together; understandings which may vary dramatically amongst individuals within and across cultures. What is true for walking together—which is supposed to be a paradigmatically “basic” activity—is likely also true for other, less “basic”

shared actions. If this is right then, at a minimum, the position of the anthropologist is no worse than the position of any other theorist confronted with the tension between the particular and the general. Whilst the immediate upshot of this discussion of context-dependence for our problem is in itself modest, it will provide a stepping stone to more robustly positive conclusions.

One of the reasons I have chosen to focus on the activity of walking together is that it is a paradigmatic specimen of shared action in both philosophical and anthropological literature. As well as being an object of philosophical speculations, it has received increasing attention in anthropology as a qualitative method of research (Ingold and Vergunst 2010, Bates and Taylor 2017). Whereas philosophers have welcomed walking together as a paradigm case for a simple, small-scale shared action, anthropologists appreciate its property of facilitating access to the lifeworld of their research partners, allowing for a shared perceptual field. Here, the shared practice becomes a way to employ Participant Observation. Since Mauss (1934), walking together has also received attention with regards to its time- and culture-specific execution. It has been used for comparative studies about its broader context to social life and the human condition (Szakolczai and Horvath 2017) and as an everyday practice that mirrors and shapes the rhythm and pace of labor and leisure time (Förster 2022). I argue (in section 3.4.) that walking together is a valuable methodological tool in anthropology precisely because of how it combines the particular with the general and the context-dependent.

Finally (in section 3.5), I will reconsider the problem of the particular and the general in the light of the foregoing discussion. The result of this discussion contains no simple “fix” for the problem—but then we should hardly expect there to be such a thing. Instead, what we end up with are the outlines of an explanation about why the activity of walking together, in all its particularity, may well yield one of the best methodologies for investigating the kinds of questions the anthropologist is interested in. This outline will be filled in over the course of the remaining two chapters, where I turn to my empirical work, which uses walking together in Makhanda to access the lifeworld of its population.

In a way, then, this chapter has a hinging function. It links up the historically minded analysis of the perils of participation with the explorative, empirical part of this thesis to come, where I will share original fieldwork experience of walking together in post-apartheid South Africa as an example of conducting Participant Observation by means of a habitual bodily practice. The double status of walking together as both a paradigm case of a shared action and a context-sensitive mode of empirical research makes it a suitable candidate to compare and scrutinize philosophical and anthropological methodology, leading ultimately to a better understanding of participation as a mode of research.

3.2 Idealization as a philosophical method

There exists a broad and uncontroversial assumption that philosophical inquiries are concerned with the analysis of abstract conceptions like ‘truth’, ‘knowledge’ or ‘being’. As Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman and Bhrigupati Singh note in their introduction to *The Ground Between: Anthropologists engage Philosophy* (2000), in order to manifest conceptual boundaries, philosophers typically turn to thought experiments, while “descriptions of actual human societies and their diversity are bracketed on the grounds that empirical data cannot solve conceptual questions” (ibid.: 1). One way to define this core feature of philosophical examples and thought experiments is through the concept of idealization. Idealization is here meant in the sense that a given phenomenon is conceptualized in its ideal form, which is general enough to clearly distinguish between what falls under it and everything else in ordinary language use.⁷³ I take idealization to be a specific type of generalization, abstraction, or reduction. More specifications on how these terms are connected will follow below, where idealization will be examined in its capacity to clarify the core idea of complex systems, but also as a distorting process of oversimplification. After summarizing the historical development of theories of idealization, I will explore the meaning of idealization in the context of examples and thought experiments in philosophy. I will then discuss the specific example of walking together as used by Margaret Gilbert and Hans Bernhard Schmid. This case study functions as an illustration of how philosophy uses examples to make universal claims about concepts such as ‘participation’, but also as a means for my critique of the overall methodology of idealization, and, finally, as a launching pad for a positive view of Participant Observation as a method productively grappling with the tension between the particular and the general.

3.2.1 Idealization in the history of science

Idealization has long been an established part of the scientific method. Galileo Galilei, widely considered the father of modern physics, used idealization to formulate the law of motion.⁷⁴ In his analysis of bodies in motion, he set up experiments that *assumed* frictionless surfaces and spheres of perfect roundness, and predicted that if a perfectly round and smooth ball were rolled along a perfectly smooth inclined plane, without any air resistance, the ball would roll endlessly—or, rather, it would slide, since rolling requires friction (Galileo 1954). This prediction was an attack on the then dominant Aristotelian notion of matter movement, which assumed that a body could only remain in so-called

⁷³ I here follow Kant’s declaration of the basic function of a concept in his *Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik* (1977): „Der Begriff ist eine allgemeine Vorstellung oder eine Vorstellung dessen, was mehreren Objekten gemeinsam ist, also eine Vorstellung, sofern sie in verschiedenen enthalten sein kann.“ (A 139-140).

⁷⁴ For a comprehensive outline of Galileo’s impact on world history, see Weidhorn 2005.

“violent” or “unnatural” motion so long as the “mover” continued to act on it (Physics H: 241a25–250b7).

The disagreement between the Galilean and Aristotelian paradigms can be made clearer by considering their underlying presumptions about the unity of the sciences. Unlike Galileo, Aristotle sharply separated mathematics from physics, partially on the basis of the degree of idealization of each. For Aristotle, whereas physics abstracts only from the singularity of the changing concrete object, mathematics *additionally* abstracts from qualitative accidents and change (Metaphysics E: 1025 b3–1028 a5; Physics B: 192b–200b). A physics that borrows its principles from mathematics is thus inevitably *incomplete* as physics, because it has left aside the qualitative richness of nature. But within its limits, in contrast to the Galilean view, Aristotelian idealization is not *distorting*.⁷⁵ Aristotelian idealization only includes features relevant to the occurrence and behavior of the phenomena of interest in the representation.⁷⁶ Alternatively, in a Galilean idealization framework, certain properties of the ‘target system’ are deliberately distorted. The representation operates on the basis of certain features of that system that are known to be false.⁷⁷ The distinction hinges on what is agreed upon as relevant for a specific investigation. Katherina Kinzel and Martin Kusch suggest that one way to keep apart these two forms of idealization is in terms of their respective goals: “Galilean idealization helps achieve computationally tractable theories, while Aristotelian idealization facilitates the isolation of relevant causes” (2018: 50). According to them, there is a place for each in the scientific activities of model-building, experiment-designing, experimental data collection and conceptual analysis.⁷⁸

Kinzel and Kusch add a third form of idealization to the list. It is in play when the researcher restricts herself “to a very small (potentially ‘one-sided’) ‘diet’ of examples”

⁷⁵ Galilean idealization, as Andrzej Klawiter summarizes it, becomes “a tool which deforms the picture of the world by idealizing neglect, thus ‘erasing’ from it everything that makes it overloaded with details and hence extremely difficult to analyze”. On the upside, this “allows to expose the basic relationship as the dependence between the most relevant magnitudes” while disregarding “the influence of other magnitudes which [...] only blur the image of the inquired phenomena” (2004: 255). Erasing details, exposing basic relationships and focusing on the relevant magnitudes of a phenomenon: idealizations framed this way made life appear simpler. This benevolent reading of Galilean idealization has been controversial. As Ernan McMullin notes, post-Galilean Aristotelians object to the Galilean technique of idealization, claiming that it is prone to falsify the real world, which “is not neat and regular, as the idealized laws would make it seem, but complicated and messy” (1985: 247). The Aristotelian camp claimed that although idealized laws do have broad explanatory power, and are useful in this sense, they should not be mistaken for truth. The philosopher of science Nancy Cartwright supports this criticism of Galilean idealization, arguing in her book *How the Laws of Physics Lie* that “powerful explanatory laws of the sort found in theoretical physics do not state the truth [...]. We have detailed expertise for testing the claim of physics about what happens in concrete situations. When we look to the real implications of our fundamental laws, they do not meet these ordinary standards [...]. We explain by *ceteris paribus* laws, by composition of causes, and by approximations that improve on what the fundamental laws dictate. In all of these cases, the fundamental laws patently do not get the facts right” (1983: 3).

⁷⁶ The concept of the ideal in Aristotle’s work is complex and here represented in a one-sided way to make a point about idealization in the history of philosophy. Richard Rorty calls this kind of use of a dead thinker’s words a rational reconstruction, which evaluates a dead thinker by translating their ideas into contemporary language and thereby disregards that “the dead thinker, in his linguistic habits as he lived, would have repudiated these terms as foreign to his interests and intentions” (1984: 54). Such a rational reconstruction is opposed to a historical reconstruction, which is the method of giving an account of a dead thinker’s ideas ‘in his own terms’.

⁷⁷ The boundary between the two paradigms is not sharp when we consider specific cases. We might ask: What can be stripped away without deforming the rest of the model? Doesn’t all subtraction amount to some sort of distortion?

⁷⁸ For a comprehensive overview of the development of scientific forms of idealization, see Chang Liu’s paper “Laws and Models in a Theory of Idealization” (2004).

(ibid). This idealization presents itself, for instance, in case studies that lack generalizability due to having an unrepresentative sample. Kinzel and Kusch label this third form of idealization “Wittgensteinian”, alluding to a passage in the *Philosophical Investigations* addressing worries about an imbalanced selection of examples: “Eine Hauptursache philosophischer Krankheiten—einseitige Diät: man nährt sein Denken nur mit einer Art von Beispielen” (PI: §593). Where Aristotelian and Galilean idealization are framed with regards to their benefits, “Wittgensteinian” idealization by definition involves falling short of something. If we were to try to articulate its appeal, however, we might cite its pragmatism. Confining itself to a small, feasible portion of examples, this third form of idealization could also be called “modest idealization”.

With these three categories of idealization in mind, I now want to turn to the problems that arise when idealization is used in philosophy and, more specifically, in philosophy of action.

3.2.2 Idealization in philosophy: intuition pumps

So far, I have defined one shortcoming of the philosophical debate on shared action as the lack of context sensitivity. Philosophers of action typically focus on the relation between the participants, their mental states, and/or the description of the action that is meant to be shared. What is missing is a thematic incorporation of social space. From a philosophical perspective, this is not a mistake, but deliberately meant to allow transferability of examples and thought experiments to similar cases. Idealization is, in this sense, a key aspect of philosophical inquiry. We can now see that depending on one’s standpoint, such idealization can be viewed as Aristotelian, Galilean or “Wittgensteinian”, modest idealization.

Scientists idealize in order to facilitate computation and causal explanation.⁷⁹ With the possible of exception of logic, prediction and computation are rare in philosophy. Philosophers use idealizations for different purposes. The most important one is the analysis of concepts (like ‘justice’, ‘virtue’ or ‘beauty’) with the help of so-called intuition-pumps: highly idealized examples, cases or thought experiments “meant to trigger the same intuitions in every appropriately trained philosopher” (Kinzel and Kusch 2018: 52).⁸⁰ The term was coined by Daniel Dennett:

⁷⁹ Whether or not these idealizations are appropriate for the target system can be determined by the degree of accuracy of scientific predictions. As Kinzel and Kusch stress, “[i]n numerous cases, scientific predictions based on distorted and simplified models do extremely well by this standard” (2018: 51-52).

⁸⁰ Another point to be made here is that what it is for two or more people to do something together is not something only trained philosophers should decide. As David Velleman put it, “it is useful to know what most people think about intentional action and moral responsibility” because “in philosophizing on these topics, we can’t stray *too* far from what people think” (Leiter Reports 2006).

Intuition pumps are cunningly designed to focus the reader's attention on "the important" features, and to deflect the reader from getting bogged down in hard-to-follow details. There is nothing wrong with this in principle. Indeed one of philosophy's highest callings is finding ways of helping people see the forest and not just the trees. But intuition pumps are often abused, though seldom deliberately. (1984: 13)

Dennett elaborates on this idea of an intuition pump with a warning about how these can be misused. Philosophical thought experiments may be formulated in a way that makes it hard to imagine important implications of the experiment, which in effect would tend to be ignored. According to Dennett, intuition pumps designed in this way often elicit intuitive but incorrect answers (ibid.).⁸¹

What does this mean for our examples from philosophy of action? Bratman, for instance, limits his theory of acting together to "the shared intentional activities of small, adult groups in the absence of asymmetric authority relations within those groups, and in which the individuals who are participants remain constant over time" (Bratman 2014: 7). He "further bracket[s] complexities introduced by the inclusion of the group within a specific legal institution such as marriage, or incorporation" and assumes "that these small groups have a stable membership" (ibid). The label assigned to this extreme simplification of shared action is "modest sociality" (ibid.: 8), and it is intended as a conceptual foundation from which more sophisticated conceptions of acting together can be built. Consider Bratman's example of two people singing a duet together:

Suppose that you and I sing a duet together, and that this is a SCA [shared cooperative activity]. I will be trying to be responsive to your intentions and actions, knowing that you will be trying to be responsive to my intentions and actions. This mutual responsiveness will be in the pursuit of the goal we each have, namely, singing the duet. You may have this goal for different reasons than I do; but at the least we will each have this as a goal. Finally, I will not merely stand back and allow you to sing your part of the duet. If I believe that you need my help, I will provide it if I can. (Bratman 1992: 327-328)

⁸¹ Dennett used intuition-pumps to describe John Searle's *Chinese room thought experiment*. This thought experiment is the centerpiece of Searle's famous Chinese room argument. It begins with the hypothetical premise that artificial intelligence research has succeeded in constructing a computer that behaves as if it understands Chinese. It takes Chinese characters as input and, by following the instructions of a computer program, produces other Chinese characters, which it presents as output. Suppose, Searle suggests, that this computer performs this task so convincingly that it passes the Turing test (that is, it convinces a human Chinese speaker that the program is itself a human Chinese speaker). With this hypothetical scenario, Searle wants to know: does the machine truly understand Chinese or is it merely simulating the ability to understand it? The experiment aims to show that a program cannot give a computer a mind or any sort of consciousness, regardless of how intelligently or human-like the program may make the computer behave. Dennett also uses the term in a positive sense to describe thought experiments which facilitate the understanding of complex subjects by harnessing intuition. In the end, however, he points towards its problematic implementations and shortcomings.

Bratman takes for granted the common knowledge of the mutual intentions *as an ideal* and states that in order to share an action, we must have this common knowledge: “I will know that we have these intentions, you will know that we have these intentions, I will at least be in the position to know this, and so on” (Bratman 1997: 102). His thought experiment is indeed meant to trigger the same intuitions in every appropriately trained philosopher, which here coincides with a group who shares background knowledge of what it is to sing a duet together.

What kind of idealization is in play in such a Dennettian intuition pump? “Wittgensteinian” or modest idealization, according to which only a small portion of examples is considered, fits with Bratman’s own description of his account as “modest sociality” and with his restrictions of his account to small, adult groups. The question is whether the absence of social asymmetry and the presumed conceptual convergence can be regarded as possible. For if we assume, as anthropologists do, that all possible situations are informed by social, cultural and economic differences and are, even if only in subtle forms, necessarily infiltrated by asymmetric power relations, they cannot. In this case, Bratman’s account is at heart Galilean, since some features of the ‘target system’ are deliberately distorted.

What is the specific appeal of this kind of idealization for philosophical conceptual analysis? I suggest two answers, which are possibly interlinked and not mutually exclusive. The first answer is that a situation dismantled from circumstances is easier to examine and to further fractionize into its assumedly essential features than one of its de-idealized actualizations. By alienating the action from its natural context, it loses its connection to a unifying whole—a loss that is regarded, by proponents of this approach, less as an irreconcilable problem than as a “bullet” to be “bitten”. The second reason has to do with one of the benefits of idealization that has not been mentioned yet, which we might call its democratizing force. Operating with ideal notions of shared actions opens up the possibility of making them potentially accessible for all intentional beings. Adapting such a view would allow idealizations of shared action to be *actually* shared, and could thus be the hidden center stone of a solid philosophical theory of shared agency.

Notwithstanding these laudable aims, anthropology and other social sciences have found much to critique in philosophical idealization. The standard critique has targeted their usefulness to understanding reality. Even if you and I and all philosophers’ and anthropologists’ intuitions about these scenarios were uniform, as with the ideal (!) Dennettian intuition pump, it would still be unclear how to fruitfully apply such accounts to interpret real-life cases.

One possible reply to this is that philosophy is not concerned with the description of what actually happens in the world, but with the analysis of our concepts. This would mean that philosophy of action is about identifying the essence of a successful shared

action, not the discussion of real occurrences of human encounters. Consider the following analogy. There is no such thing as pure copper. Copper, as found in nature, always contains some level of other elements and metals as impurities. Chemists nevertheless use the idealized description put up in the periodic table—the element with the symbol *Cu* and atomic number 29—for their calculations and theories, to make scientific progress. Hence, philosophers, arguably at least also concerned with scientific progress the way natural sciences are, should do that too, with the employment of idealized conceptions of *shared action*.⁸²

My worry about this response, to anticipate the discussion still to come in this chapter, is that philosophical theories of shared action work with *unreasonably high* levels of idealization. I will return to this point shortly, but first I need to clarify the nature of my main worry, which concerns not so much the high level of idealization, but its *invisibility*.

3.2.3 Walking together: a case study in philosophical idealization

I have discussed Bratman’s approach as an example of “Wittgensteinian” or modest idealization, with the distortive nature of Galilean idealization characteristic of methodological individualism. Although Bratman himself does not use the example of walking together, we can easily imagine him exchanging the singing with walking. In that case, Bratman would invoke an intention on the part of each of the walking participants that they walk together, and presume that each party do their parts to keep the shared action going. In this, he would be explicit about his restrictions to small-scale cases of shared action, as noted above.

To motivate my “invisibility worry” with Bratman’s approach, let me walk you through two more cases where walking together is used as an intuition pump, yet in a different way. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Gilbert argues that when we agree to go for a walk together, we produce a shared commitment specific to the shared action—in this case: walking. In her 1990 paper “Walking Together. A Paradigmatic Social Phenomenon”, Gilbert illustrates the implications of her theory with the example of two individuals, Jack and Sue, going for a walk together. She takes this shared practice as a “small-scale temporary” phenomenon, adding that this “idea is attractive insofar as it should be relatively easy to understand what it is to go for a walk with another person” (1990: 2). As the essay title suggests, she proposes to consider going for a walk together a paradigm of social phenomena in general. This is how her example starts:

⁸² This view is prominently defended by David Chalmers (2010, 2012).

Imagine that Sue Jones is out for a walk along Horsebarn Road on her own. Suddenly she realizes that someone else—a man in a Black cloak—has begun to walk alongside her, about a foot away. His physical proximity is clearly not enough to make it the case that they are going for a walk together. It may disturb Sue precisely because they are *not* going for a walk together. (1990: 2, original emphasis)

From here, Gilbert thinks through conditions under which it can reasonably be said for the two to walk together by means of exclusion. She suggests that it would, for example, be appropriate in this context to demand the other to wait up or to walk faster in order to stay true to one's commitment, and that failure to do so would mean the end of the shared action. Gilbert then considers what she labels the "shared personal goal analysis" where she introduces 'common knowledge' as a condition for the action to be shared:

On this account, it is logically necessary and sufficient for a case of going for a walk together that it is *common knowledge* between Jack and Sue that each one has the goal in question. By this I mean, roughly, that each one's goal is completely out in the open as far as the two of them are concerned. (1990: 3, original emphasis)

Gilbert goes on to state that such common knowledge could arise in various ways, but does not specify that any further other than that in some contexts it may be sufficient for both parties to continue walking alongside each other without a sign of discomfort. She then illustrates a case where the agreement is articulated:

Suppose Jack Smith coughs to attract Sue's attention, and then asks if she is Sue Jones and would she mind if he joins her? "No," Sue says, "that would be nice. I should like some company." This is probably enough to produce a case of going for a walk together. Once the exchange has taken place, both parties will be entitled to assume that the attitude and actions appropriate to their going for a walk are in place. (1990: 6-7)

This example is comfortably situated in a context where what it means to go for a walk together is culturally predetermined. Walking together is described as a basic, paradigmatic example for shared action, ready to work as an intuition pump. The pretext is that we all—the reader, Gilbert, Jack and Sue—share sufficient cultural background that what it is to walk together is a shared idea from the beginning and can be presumed in order to get to the details of an account on how to succeed in doing it. Jack and Sue have a common idea not only of what it takes to go for a walk together, but also seem to share a much broader frame of what it is to participate. For instance, it is silently agreed upon what an agreement consists in, how it is expressed, how it is violated and what kind of commitment follows from it.

Let us look at one more example: Hans Bernhard Schmid begins his 2005 book *Wir-Intentionalität* with the example of Anna and Berta hiking together. Like Gilbert, Schmid starts with the individual's perspective:

Nehmen wir [...] einmal an, Anna befindet sich allein und frei auf einer Bergwanderung. Auf einem anderen Weg geht ebenso allein Berta einher. Bertas Weg mündet in denjenigen von Anna. Man kennt sich nicht. Ohne anzuhalten nickt man sich vielleicht kurz zu und geht hintereinander weiter den Berg hoch. (2005: 16)

The example goes on to illustrate how the two fall into talking, and thus walking together, and how exactly the shift from a solitary to a shared action is manifest in certain linguistic utterings (“Wollen *wir* hier vielleicht eine kurze Rast einlegen?” vs. “Hätten *Sie* vielleicht auch Lust, hier zu rasten?”), therewith pointing to the delicacy with which the “we” is either assumed or avoided.⁸³

Like Gilbert, Schmid stresses that social coordination on its own does not beget shared action. Anna could not form the intention of walking together with Berta if she thought that Berta would not walk together with her. In order to form the intention requisite for her socially coordinated behavior to count as a contribution to the collective act, Anna must expect or believe that Berta will in fact walk together with her. Schmid argues that Anna must believe that Berta intends to contribute to the collective act (2005: 113–114). He questions the need to consider intentionality at all when considering community, and argues that what Anna and Berta potentially do together cannot be determined solely through observable behavior. Thus, intentionality must play a role in participation, regardless of the specific kind of participation.

Schmid explicitly refrains from beginning his inquiry into what a shared action is with a methodological reflection: “Am Anfang soll das Phänomen stehen—Anna und Berta, deren Beispiel als Leitfaden durch die verschiedenen Theorien gemeinsamen Intendierens und Handelns dienen wird” (ibid.: 25). The phenomenon first. Schmid's approach in this respect is the same as Gilbert's: What they aim to explain is not the specific quality of a unique, real occurrence of the phenomenon of *walking together*. Rather, they use the phenomenon *as such* as an ideal paradigm case of a shared intentional action, against which the success of the emergence of collective intentionality can be measured.

Gilbert and Schmid are by far not the only philosophers presupposing specific ideals of what it should mean to go about a specific task, and thus what constitutes a specific shared action that can be correctly labelled as the task allegedly in the mind of all its participants. Also, their choice of walking together as an intuition pump, in many ways, is

⁸³ Overall, Schmid points out that reasons for the action need not be mutual, but the stability and durance might suffer with a lack of shared reasons. See Schmid 2005: 107-133.

apposite for their aims of philosophical concept building: It is a small-scale shared action, here confined to two people, which makes it easier to trace in its implications than, say, the shared action of a football team, a tribe or a nation. What is more, the example of walking together has a bodily component, and with its physicality comes also visibility: one of the shared action's conditions is that two people walk beside each other at the same pace, which is perceivable more easily than the collective effort of a football team to score a goal. All of this points to walking together as maintaining its well-deserved status as a paradigm example for a shared action. Last but not least, walking is an activity all fully healthy humans of a certain age are normally capable of, and therewith perhaps as close as one can get to a universally accessible idea of a shared action. It is this idea, the alleged universality and common accessibility of walking together, that will be put under scrutiny in the next section.

3.3 On the very idea of ideal walking

We have seen how walking together is put to work as an example of a paradigmatically “basic” or “simple” action: an action which everyone understands in the same way. But upon closer examination, this assessment of walking together is questionable. My aim for the rest of this chapter is to foreground particularities of walking together which Gilbert's account tacitly takes for granted. I will begin by considering a range of literary and philosophical writings concerned with the various aspects of walking, and of walking together. This will help to see how deeply ingrained specific, ideal notions of what it means to go for a walk are. I will then discuss different practical functions of walking together and how an individual's understanding of these functions depends on hidden contextual factors. The point I want to make, however, is not just that walking together can mean more than one thing. Whilst it seems intuitively true that each person may have a notion of a “right” way to walk, or walk together, and that not everyone's norms are the same, my additional claim is that in philosophical examples, the presupposed sameness is of a specific, western brand, perpetuating discursive paternalism over how this specific shared action is supposed to be practiced.

These observations about walking together have important ramifications for the more general methodological questions concerning the relationship between the particular and the general. If one accepts that what is true for walking together is true for other universalizable actions (like making tea, for example), then we have to cast doubt on the idea that there is an unambiguous way to generate idealized examples which exclude particularity. And if this is right, then at a minimum, the position of the anthropologist

towards the tension between the particular and the general is no worse than the position of the philosopher.

3.3.1 Normative claims about walking together

Walking, while serving numerous different practical and social functions, has been subjected to just as many normative beliefs about its “right” purpose and execution.

For instance, we may think of walking as a deeply non-capitalist practice. It is free of charge, requires little to no equipment, and can be practiced without any intention to produce or consume specific service or material goods. In his introduction to *A Philosophy of Walking*, Frédéric Gros remarks that “[t]o walk, you need to start with two legs. The rest is optional” (2015: 2). Rebecca Solnit notes in her book *Wanderlust* that walking itself “is the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals” (2014: 5). Walking, understood this way, is not about profit, but about benefit. But what is the benefit?

A second property widely attributed to walking is that it facilitates thinking. Thinking is itself not inherently anti-capitalist, but, as Solnit observes, is oftentimes perceived “as doing nothing in a production-oriented culture, and” she adds, “doing nothing is hard to do. It’s best done as disguising it as doing something, and the something closest to doing nothing is walking” (2014: 5). Philosophers have long known that walking can elevate the spirit and facilitate thinking. Plato was recognized for his ambling whilst working out ideas. Aristotle had a habit of strolling up and down whilst teaching. There is not sufficient evidence to claim that ancient Greek philosophers habitually walked while philosophizing, but Greek architecture, most famously the school Aristotle set up in Athens, accommodated walking as a social, conversational activity. In Aristotle’s *Peripatetic School*, most classes were held in its name-giving, covered colonnades, or walkways—in Greek *peripatoi*, from *peripatētikós*: of walking, or walking around—which connected the temple of Apollo with the shrine of the Muses (Solnit 2014: 15, with reference to Grayeff 1974: 38-39). Walking together was an acknowledged way to engage in dispute and discussion, and gradually became a paradigm action for thinkers to accompany their thoughts. It took some more centuries, however, until ink was spilled *on walking*.

William Hazlitt’s writing appears to be the first essay specifically dwelling on the quality of walking (Solnit 2014: 119). At the beginning of the 19th century, Hazlitt fostered the idea of walking alone as a prime way to see the world ‘as it is’:

One of the pleasantest things in the world is going on a journey; but I like to go by myself [because] you cannot read the book of nature, with being perpetually put to the trouble of translating it for the benefit of the other [...]. I want to see my vague notions float like the down of the thistle and not to have them entangled in the briars and throws of controversy. (Hazlitt 1983: 253)

Hazlitt was not the only or first stroller preferring solitude. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, remarked in his *Confessions* that he could only meditate while walking. “When I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs” (1953: 382). Rousseau repeatedly emphasized that walking is best done alone.⁸⁴ While the experience of “reading the book of nature” remains a prime and often recited function of walking, the solitary, explorative practice became the subject of writing in urban realms in 19th century Paris and other European capitals of culture. Through the work of Honoré de Balzac (1853), Søren Kierkegaard (1978), Charles Baudelaire (1970) and others, the dandy figure of the *flâneur* became prominent as a literary type and an icon of modern metropolis. A connoisseur of life, the *flâneur* is paradigmatically male, seen promenading urban spaces in style and self-paced solitude.⁸⁵ He explores urban territory while performing a bohemian lifestyle in sauntering otiosity.⁸⁶

There is a notable tension in the figure of the *flâneur* between his longing for introspection afforded by solitude and an intrinsic need to understand himself in relation to others. Immersed in the anonymous masses of a modern city, he is an ambivalent figure, described as curious and thoughtful about his surrounding, yet somewhat idle, seeking to waste time with aimless ambling. He may be concentrated or absentminded, hungry for engaged experience or satiated with disengaged spectatorship. A special brand of pedestrian, the *flâneur* became a paradigm figure for a worldly way of urban, gentlemanly walking with an eccentric touch. His walking appearance stands out, yet somewhat subtly: While much of what he does in his capacity as a *flâneur* overlaps with the walking practices of his surroundings, he is not to be confused with the common man on his way to work, nor the sluggard roaming the streets to find amusement. For the *flâneur*, the act of walking is ascribed an intrinsic value—he does it, at least also, for its own sake.

⁸⁴ In his later life, Rousseau wrote the book *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* (1979), where each chapter is a short, personal essay labelled as a walk. The book, however, is not about walking, but about the reveries that occupy his strolls.

⁸⁵ I take the absence of a *flâneuse* in the literature of dandy geniuses walking the cities of mostly Europe as an indication for the manifold restrictions for women moving about in public space, and the gender-based connection between thinking hard and masculinity. For more literature on solitary strolling and roaming of men, see Walter Benjamin (1978) or Georg Simmel (1993). For female perspectives on walking, see Elizabeth Wilson (1992); specifically on the history of gender-based public harassment, see Carol Brooks Gardner (1995). More recently, Lauren Elkin (2016) has written a book on the figure of the urban *flâneuse* in 19th century cities, which uncovers the hitherto untold stories of female intellectual urban life of that time.

⁸⁶ It would be interesting to further explore the relationship between bohemian and bourgeois images of the *flâneur*, which highlights the coincidence of spending time with a practice free of charge while also being a man of means who can afford to.

While there clearly is more than one way to walk appropriately, depending on one's standing in society and one's mission, there seems to be something deeply democratic about walking together. Solnit writes that

instead of a few great experts, walking has a multitude of amateurs—everyone walks, a surprising number of people think about walking, and its history is spread across many scholars' fields [...]. The history of walking is everyone's history. (2014: vii)

While this seems obviously true for the actual practice, its literary stylization as a means to elevate thinking, for a long time, narrowed the scope of what kind of histories about and on walking made it into western canonical thought.

Of course, the topic of walking is buried in books about many other things. Over the last decade, however, publications explicitly on walking, hiking, travelling or marching with an eye on philosophy became plentiful, and helped growing further the idea of walking as a bodily act of intellectual maieutic, but also connected walking to 'true' experience of the 'real' world. Gros speculates that walking

is a matter not just of truth, but also of reality. To walk is to experience the real. Not reality as pure physical exteriority or as what might count as a subject, but reality as what holds good: the principle of solidity, of resistance. When you walk you prove it with every step: the earth holds good. (2015: 94)

The already quoted *Wanderlust* (2014) by Rebecca Solnit and her previous *Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005), but also the recent *The Meaning of Travel* (2020) by Emily Thomas bear further witness to this interest, compiling and dwelling on the long and windy intellectual history of walking. Thomas shows that for many intellectuals of the Enlightenment, travel on foot represented a prime way of exploring one's surrounding in order to find one's place in it. Home, as Thomas put it, was not where the heart was. Rather, from the 17th century onwards, thinkers were driven to travel by the compulsion to understand the world. Travelling, largely on foot, was about investigating and learning, understanding and contextualizing. Thomas' study of walking sheds light on an impulse many share but few examine: to travel is to learn. Travel became an empirical, scientifically relevant exercise, and scientists started reading groups to discuss travel reports. This practice bears special relevance for anthropology, for it was also during this time the travel reports of James Cook and his co-traveler, the ethnologist Georg Forster (2007), were

received with the scientific interest of the armchair anthropologist by scholars like E.B. Tylor (1871) and James Frazer (1890).⁸⁷

In a somewhat more experimental fashion, John Kaag's *Hiking with Nietzsche* (2018) tells the story of a philosopher, Kaag himself, literally tracing back another philosopher's, Nietzsche's, footsteps to Basel and the Swiss mountains. Throughout the book, but also in the other above-mentioned texts on the benefits of walking, traveling on foot is described not just as being about exploring and explaining the material world, but also about finding proximity to the divine, the transcendental and the metaphysical. In that framework, walking represents something perennial, an enduring (or continually recurring) human urge to connect with their world by discovering it, step by step. In a chapter entitled *Why do Philosophers Care about Travel?*, Thomas states that "[t]he difference between everyday journeys and travel journeys is not a matter of distance [but it] lies in how much otherness the traveler experiences" (2020: 4-5).

What most of these writings have in common is a soft spot for a romanticized, idealized, and prescriptive notion of walking. An exception in point, Solnit remarks that "[b]oth walks and essays are meant to be pleasant, even charming, and so no one ever gets lost and lives on grubs and rainwater in a trackless forest, has sex in a graveyard with a stranger, stumbles into a battle, or sees visions of another world" (2014: 120). At the same time, none of the classic, western-canonical essays on walking mentioned here can resist telling us how to *properly* walk. Specific moral standards are often presupposed, yet unfounded. Most essays—and most of them rather sooner than later—declare what a walk should look and feel like. Solnit quizzically remarks that even Henry David Thoreau could not resist preaching:

‘I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness,’ he famously begins his 1851 essay ‘Walking’, for like all the other essayists he connects walking in the organic world with freedom. (Solnit 2014: 122)

It is somewhat ironic that walking is explained as an act of freedom, followed by a detailed instruction of how exactly to be free. Such normative claims are frequently accompanied with the dichotomous separation of culture/nature. Gros, for instance, insists that “[i]t cannot be said too often: [...]. The true direction of walking is not towards otherness (other worlds, other faces, other cultures, other civilizations); it is towards the edge of civilized worlds, whatever they may be” (2015: 94), therewith perpetuating the idea that walking, if

⁸⁷ Also, although mostly famous for his philosophical work, Immanuel Kant is an outstanding example for armchair anthropology. My personal favorite is a piece from his early writing on Africa. Kant has published extensively on the “customs” of cultures he himself has never experienced. In a passage on an unspecified tribe in Madagascar, he writes: “Im Übrigen haben sie keine andre Gottheit, als eine Grille, die sie in einem Korbe füttern, in den sie die ihnen bösen Sachen setzen. [...] Eine Art Schlange kriecht den Unvorsichtigen mit grosser Geschwindigkeit in den After—und tötet sie” (Kant 1839: 435).

done right, is paving the way not just into the culturally unknown, but into a world *beyond* culture. As a last example, let us briefly hark back to the literary prime time of the flâneur, where it was Balzac who first wrote a thorough inquiry on the social norms of walking. In his *Théorie de la démarche* (1853), Balzac analyzed peoples' gaits, dividing the process of walking into several phases, and offered a list of factors he took to influence the gait (such as mood and personality, height and weight, but also profession and social class). Balzac, too, ends on a normative note, prescribing the right way to walk according to class and gender norms of his time and place (1981: 299-301; see also Collado-Vázquez and Carrillo 2012).

I have offered this brisk walk through the literature of walking to demonstrate the presence of a dominant set of preconceptions of what it is to walk, what it facilitates and how it is done best. Most tales, descriptions or instructions of walking that made it into the western canon were written by and about educated men of wealth and societal status, subscribing to specific moral norms of the western world, all while proclaiming walking to be an act of universal freedom. This idea of walking contains the ideas of gentlemanly wisdom and moral exhortation. I propose that this image-building history of the meaning of walking had an influence on the overall perception of walking together as a good example for a simple, small scale shared action because it is *portrayed as* universally accessible and understood.

3.3.2 Context-dependence of walking together

While, as shown above, there is a dominant set of western norms about walking, which is tied to the broader circumstances people live in, there are in fact many variations of the practice that lie beyond the western canon, and alternative sets of norms attached to each function. Walking can be an act of mobility, a matter of security, a creation of private space in public, but also a ritual of communion. Its meaning, depending on the context and social setting, can vary even more vastly as an act of participation. Walking *together* can, for example, mean to engage in an intimate conversation whilst ambulating side by side. Here, the shared practice has verbal exchange as a necessary condition. In another setting, where trotting alongside each other in common pace makes one less vulnerable to predators, walking together can be a vehicle of safety. It becomes a shared intentional action through the fact that each pedestrian intends to safely arrive at the same place, and acknowledges that walking together is the way to achieve that goal. The character of public space, but also, for instance, gender norms or the daily routines of working life fluctuate around the world, and each leave their mark on the practice. Before treating this matter in more detail, let me dwell on what this means for the example of walking together as an intuition pump for philosophical concept building.

3.3.3 Implications for philosophical ideals

In an earlier section, I considered the charge made against philosophy that it is unclear how to fruitfully apply such accounts to interpret real-life cases as they occur in Participant Observation. I suggested how a standard reply to this charge might go: philosophy of action is about identifying the essence of a successful shared action, not the discussion of real occurrences of human encounters. We are now in a position to see why this reply does not quell all of the reasonable worries one might have about idealizing approaches. My claim is that the prevalent theories of shared action work with unreasonably high levels of idealization.

In scientific practice, idealization is typically followed by a thorough process of de-idealization. Natural scientists seek to increase the predictive accuracy of their theories by systematically removing what they have previously idealized. In the case of copper, physicists have come to formulate corrections that make due allowance for the size of molecules and for their mutual attraction. Since the scientific laws created through idealization describe the behavior of *ideal* matter in ideal movement, these laws can only be used to predict the behavior of *real* bodies when a considerable number of factors have been physically eliminated or ignored. Although some components may actually exist in isolation, typically they do not, hence the need for idealization. As Chang Liu points out, theoretical arguments and experimental devices are frequently used to approximate the idealized models, but these models may never be literally realized (Liu 2004: 382). Accordingly, Bratman's and Gilbert's theory would help us to understand "a caricature, an artefact of the idealization process, but nothing else" (Kinzel and Kusch 2018: 52), for Bratman offers nothing to check this type of "non-asymmetrical social setting" against, apart from the caricature he uses to construct it in the first place. Bratman idealizes social actions to a degree impossible to reach in actual human encounter, leaving no guidance for how we should come to have this common knowledge (of what it exactly entails to sing a duet *or* of the fact that our conceptions are actually the same). Gilbert, too, confines her theory to the ideal of having shared concepts, with no instruction of how to get to this 'epistemic state of mind'. Such Galilean idealizations prevalent in the philosophical discourse seem to make it impossible to adequately capture any real-world 'target systems'. Aristotelian idealizations, by contrast, are also tricky to de-idealize, but since they are not distortive in nature, they can function as a theoretical framework that will have to, and can be scrutinized through particular empirical findings.

An additional charge is applicable to Gilbert's example of walking together. At first it might have appeared similar to a Bratmanian form of modest sociality. However, remember the goal posts of her account: There is a conception of "We-ness" at work in

Gilbert's theory according to which a shared attitude is not just a sum of individual attitudes—like it is in Bratman's account—and which entails a strong sense of togetherness (Gilbert 2014). What the two accounts have in common is that they each seek to clarify something by taking it for granted. Gilbert's preconditions in her walking example—consisting substantially of a large set of common preconceptions about politeness, punctuality, and a specific mode of walking next to each other—are not impossible, but crafting the thought experiment this way presumes the ideal of having a shared conception of (at least) the described shared action—in this case, of walking together—which seems to be the thing to explain, rather than the premise to build on. One way to frame this problem is to say that both Bratman and Gilbert imagine as their audience not only a group of “properly trained philosophers” but with that, implicitly, a cultural group that shares a decisively western view of what it is to do things like walking together. The difference is that Bratman was careful enough to add a built-in disclaimer to his account, while Gilbert's theory performs the authoritarian gesture of a universal theory—an account for everyone. Looking at the issue of representability, we might now want to ask: What if the problem is not really the lack of complexity, as suggested so far, but simply the narrowness of the scope? Let me return to the third, “modest” type of idealization, initially labelled as “Wittgensteinian”. So far, I have considered how the above examples are taken to illustrate how shared action works are idealized by following a model of reciprocity never found in actual interaction. But there is a related issue to be discussed: Not only are these examples over-idealized, they also focus on an extremely narrow scope of humans, packed into Heinrich, Heine and Norenzayan's acronym WEIRD: the Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (Heinrich, Heine and Norenzayan 2010). Accordingly, the problem is not that these theories of shared action exclude particularity *per se*, but that there is a built-in particularity to the claimed universality. In other words, what is going on is not idealization although there should not be any, but idealization on the wrong level. While it seems perfectly fine to idealize, universalize and conceptualize ‘participation’—just like ‘beauty’ or ‘justice’—it seems wrong to set a universal idea of the particular shared action of walking together.

3.4 Walking together as a method

Up to this point, the discussion has focused on a critique of philosophical methodology. What can this critique offer in terms of positive conclusions for the questions about anthropological methodology that are our central concern?

The features of walking together that enticed Gilbert to treat it as a paradigmatic example of a simple shared action derive from its universalizability. We have seen that Gilbert is wrong about the simplicity part. But of course, she is not completely wrong in the

features she identifies as making walking *universal*. As anthropologists themselves have recognized, there is a kind of universality to walking together, in comparison to other sorts of activities, that makes it a powerful research tool. While anthropologists value and explore its manifold, culture-specific connotations, walking is also recognized as something that unites the human race as bipedalists—a paradigmatic human action in an important sense—making it an ideal “entry point” for studying other cultures and life-forms. The critical point is that whatever universality it has, this is not a kind that excludes particularity.

In this section, I will introduce anthropology’s employment of walking together as a mode of Participant Observation. My aim is to show how, as a context-sensitive mode of joint bodily practice that is embedded in a broader framework of social life, walking together *combines the universal and the particular* in a way that makes it a powerful research method for anthropologists. In short, when we understand what Gilbert gets wrong about walking together *in conjunction with* what she gets right about it, we end up with the outlines of a satisfying explanation about why walking together, in all its particularity *and* its universality, is a form of Participant Observation that promises to overcome the methodological challenges we have been considering.

3.4.1 Walking together as an anthropological research method

It was Marcel Mauss who famously put walking on the map of anthropological inquiry:

I think that I can recognize a girl who has been raised in a convent. In general, she will walk with her fists closed. And I can still remember my third-form teacher shouting at me: “Brute! Why do you walk around the whole time with your hands flapping wide open?” Thus there exists an education in walking, too”. (Mauss 1934: 7, my translation)

While the first part of the quote remains at the level of observation, the second part propounds in what way walking is a habitus. Mauss’ point was that the body can be the object to the collective subject known as “society” (Ingold and Vergunst 2008: 2). As touched upon in chapter 1, Mauss invited the Aristotelian term *habitus* as a key concept for an understanding of human techniques of the body. Accordingly, walking, like all our bodily activities, is largely shaped by sociocultural processes of education and imitation. By framing habitus as socially constructed, he firmly planted Durkheim’s theory of collective representation as a *sui generis* phenomenon in the social sciences, ready to grow in emerging discourses around and of the body. By using walking as an example, Mauss’ writing helped popularizing the practice as a prime indicator, revealing to the anthropologist plenty about their research partners’ place in their community, and in the

world. Walking became a research object in its own right (Middleton 2016), but it took some decades until walking together was developed into a research method appendant to Participant Observation.

Perhaps obviously, walking together has always been a major part of ethnographic research insofar as anthropologists walk around a lot with or without their research partners. However, it has only received systematic attention as a research method in the last two decades. As Jenny Middleton (2016: 2) observes, with increasing numbers of publications over the last 15 years, more attention has been paid to walking as “both a topic and mode of social research” (2016: 2; see also Bates and Taylor 2017). Walking together has since become a designated research tool to explore specific lifeworlds together with one’s local collaborators. Therein, anthropologists do not mainly focus on the specific quality of the practice itself, but appreciate its instrumental value as a means to explore new spacial and social terrain. In the 1980s, promenadology (or strollology, as it is also sometimes called) became a designated method in cultural studies.⁸⁸

Since then, a multitude of approaches of and through walking together have been anthropologically examined. While some scholars focus on its transferential power that allows to connect with an environment, others explore its various modes of practice to tease out interpretations about the connection between modes of walking and modes of living. For instance, Kay and Moxham (1996) and Edensor (2000) chart the multiplicity of cultural connotations associated with walking practices. Anderson (2004) emphasizes the role of the environment in shared activity, arguing that conversations held whilst walking through a place have the potential to generate collaborative knowledge on how to improve that space. And in *Wissenschaft vom Gehen* (2013), Andreas Mayer provides an illuminating historical account of different forms of the human walk since the late 18th century.

Overall, walking is recognized as a smooth, low-threshold entry point into the field. As noted earlier, there seems to be something democratic about walking together. Most places grant its citizens equal right and opportunity to execute the task, and doing it together means to meet on equal footing and to share the path ahead, which links up nicely with the goals of Participant Observation.

Adding another asset to this method of research, walking together allows to hide the talk behind the walk. Bourdieu had already pointed out that walking while talking is less confrontational than interviews, loosening tongues and letting the research partner move in her known environment (Bourdieu 2004). In line with this, Ingold suggests that walking gives thought room to breathe, thus “becom[ing] less the topic than the medium of my meditation” (2018a: 23), which in turn facilitates the free flow of exchange that in an

⁸⁸ The term was coined by the Swiss sociologist Lucius Burckhardt—as *Spaziergangswissenschaft*. Burckhardt was seeking a methodological tool to experience the then rapidly ascending technocratic, centrally planned economy in Europe (Burckhardt 2006). The aim was to become aware of the conditions of perception of the environment and enhancement of environmental perception itself.

interview is restricted though the stagnancy of sitting face to face.⁸⁹ Walking together as a mode of research is (at least) less (obviously) dominated by asymmetric power relations than a standard interview, which by definition is the frontal interrogation of someone's answers by someone else's questions. Walking together, by contrast, allows us to be directed at the world together rather than on each other.

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of the shared experience is that when one walks alongside someone, one *shares the same view ahead*. That is what makes it so different from face-to-face interaction, as in an interview, where each can see behind the other's back and into each other's eyes. The possibility of shared action, in the case of walking together, is at least partially enabled by the possibility of shared immersion in a perceptual field. My research partner can point to something, and I can say "Oh, I see what you mean", because—as my attention follows their ostensive gesture—I really *can* see what they see. And while of course, the interpretation of what we see might differ vastly, we can learn, by following our research partner's ostensive gesture and gaze, where to look, and eventually also what to look for.

Here, participation becomes the teacher of observation, as walking together teaches us to see things "with the eyes" of our guiding research partners. This communion can thus become a habituated form of practice, both in its participant and its observant dimension—a habitus, which communicates from body to body, that is, as Bourdieu put it, on "the hither side of words or concepts" (1977: 1-2). As such, it provides the very foundation of sociality upon which communication can then proceed and meanings can be shared. Walking together is to learn from each other.

There are two points to be noted about this advantage of walking together as a learning technique. Firstly, and crucially, walking together enables us to extricate ourselves from the vicious circle I have pointed out in Gilbert's account, that otherwise forces us to establish shared commitments through some process of communication which is only possible, in principle, once such commitments are already established. Walking together, in this context, becomes a superior mode of Participant Observation because it allows the researcher to successively build new habits to perceive her surrounding in the way locals do. Knowing what it is we are doing becomes an achievement.

Secondly, as discussed in chapter 1, the researcher conducting Participant Observation in the field is in a strange position in that her task on the one hand is to immerse herself into the everyday life of her research partners, while on the other hand, she has to keep track of the practices she is eager to become familiar with. She has thus to strive for the creation of a habit that she then seeks to meticulously describe in scientifically relevant and accessible terms. Walking together with local collaborators allows her to move

⁸⁹ This aspect is explored in urban studies, for instance by David Adams (2016), who uses "go-along data" to explore the embodied significance of individuals' recollections and nostalgia in Birmingham, UK.

back and forth between modes of learning and modes of knowing. Her primordially unreflected bodily practice can be gradually transformed by a successive achievement of reflective awareness triggered by the walking mode of her research partner. It is this alteration between attention and habit that makes long-term fieldwork tricky, and its results valuable. Walking together, if taken seriously as a practice to explore in its own right, thus becomes an epistemological gateway to context-dependent, non-propositional knowledge buried in everyday practice.

3.4.2 Walking together as a context-dependent practice

The meaning and execution of walking and walking together can vary enormously depending on the social and cultural context.

The researcher eager to explore this arrives in the field with her very own manner of walking that might be unreflected and deeply habitualized. In my personal experience, the idea of walking is closely connected to the notion of leisure, of enjoying public space, and walking together is a matter of pleasure, rarely of necessity—in fact, my ideal of a walk is, perhaps not so surprisingly, much like the ideals evoked by Thoreau, Rousseau, Kierkegaard et. al. This of course had major implications on my participatory research on walking together in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, where the lived reality of public space is very different from what I am used to as a white woman from central Europe. On the one hand, the difference generates visibility through contrast: I see and feel what is different. On the other, my contextual horizon was continuously broadened, allowing for my interpretations to connect to a bigger picture that allows, in turn, for thicker description. This contextual horizon, which can also be described as a continually solidifying contextual frame, moved with every step I took, but the movement was induced and guided by the research partner and not dominated by me, the researcher. Walking together can thus be a way to hand interpretative sovereignty of context-bound knowledge to those the anthropologist seeks to understand.

For instance, walking practices and their meanings depend on the (dis)connection people feel to the ground beneath them. One way to think about walking as a situated practice is thus with regards to the relationship people have with the soil they walk on. Anthropologists have used walking as a method to investigate the affiliation people feel with their land. As Menley notes in her work on Palestine, “walking becomes an important means not for pursuing personal health, but for cultivating [...] knowledge of the nurturing relationship between land and the people who walk across it. Such practices of walking with or walking together can, I conclude, function as forms of kinwork” (2019: 148).⁹⁰

⁹⁰ While I do not wish to strike a connection between Palestine and South Africa’s apartheid state, I do want to take up Menley’s idea of a formation of kinship through walking.

Another factor for context-dependence is the physical disposition of the walking participants. Physical abilities like fitness and sight can alter the tempo and rhythm of a walk. Moreover, footgear matters. Are sturdy shoes an asset or a filter? Are all walkers equally equipped? This of course also depends on the nature and character of the ground: wet soil, pebbles, bush, tar. Finally, the weather plays a key role: do people walk differently when they are cold? How does the solar altitude, or wind force, affect one's gait?

Walking together, in an anthropological framework, has to be tied up in a specific context, and embedded in the broader practices of everyday life. In this sense, it can also be a means to an end as a vehicle to transform unique encounters—a stroll or a hike with one's research partner—into more general interpretations about how people live.

3.5 Revisiting the tension between the particular and the general

How can we reconcile the way philosophical intuition pumps work with anthropological fieldwork practice? Although there is no easy ease to the tension between the particular and the general, my suggestion is to learn from existing ways to do so. In this chapter I have presented three kinds of idealization. All of them, naturally, imply beneficial simplifications that come at a cost. Galilean idealization distorts, Aristotelian idealization picks out only what it deems relevant and the “Wittgensteinian” kind confines itself to a narrow portion of examples. While for philosophical purposes of conceptual analysis, each of them has its merits, they all bear problems when adapted for generalizing claims about particular encounters as done by anthropologists. Looking at the exemplary act of walking together, we could see how idealization on the wrong level can lead to either conceptual distortion of the described phenomenon or definitory exclusion of what should fall under a specific phenomenon definition.

I would like to suggest, however, that the tension between the particular and the general can be eased with the right type of idealization. Rather than promoting some sort of middle ground, I propose that the challenge in using Participant Observation as a research method is to learn when and how to switch from a particular mode of experience to general mode of analysis.

But what does this precisely mean for walking together as a mode of doing Participant Observation? As we have seen in chapter 1, the movement from particular experience to general claims about a specific way of life should happen with constant eye on context. Generalizations must be coherent with the broader picture. This means that the Galilean, distortive kind of idealization is to be avoided at all cost. As the anthropologist builds non-propositional knowledge through bodily participation, she will (mis)interpret,

again and again, what is relevant and true for a given context. Aristotelian idealization, then, is a goal to be achieved. Finally, there is a sense in which the confinement to a small portion of examples is inevitable, given the framing of a specific anthropological project. Understood in Wittgenstein's sense, however, the anthropologist needs to stay alert of her "diet of examples". While any case study is, by definition, restricted to a limited number of samples, these samples should ideally be representative for the topical nucleus of the project. A one-sided diet of examples is thus another thing to be avoided. The skill to know what kind of idealization is or should be in play at any given moment in the field—and in the armchair—is, again, something that can only be acquired by long-term immersion in a particular social setting. Unlike quantitative research, Participant Observation does not provide rules or guidelines regarding the specific time or mode of this immersion. Rather, it is up to the anthropologist to decide. This skill is not computably traceable or otherwise quantifiable, and whether one does it right can thus not be proven right or wrong.

Anthropology, as we have seen in the discussion of the tension between the particular and the general in chapter 1, also looks back at a long history of producing idealized depictions of social reality. Idealizing types, races and cultures used to be standard in anthropological inquiry. Attempts to de-idealize static notions of culture, formalized methodology and essentialist theory have been deemed core issues of critical anthropology. With the turn to phenomenology and the emergence of anthropology of the body, the empirical groundedness of anthropology was given new weight, and the "real" encounter of Participant Observation became theoretically anchored in the idea that only the bodily experience of fieldwork practice can yield non-propositional knowledge crucial for anthropology's ideal of a holistic understanding of human agency. But of course, a purely inductive approach is itself an ideal type. As Duranti remarks, "[s]ometimes our previously conceived analytical categories provide us with a useful framework to make sense of new information. Other times, the fit is not there. An anthropological perspective must honor the universal without forgetting the particular" (2015: 1).⁹¹ In line with this, exploring the touching points of philosophy and anthropology, Jackson notes: "Whereas ethnography demands immersion in a world of others or otherness, philosophy saves us from drowning by providing us with means of regarding our sense of comprehension, composure, and command in a world of confusing and confounding experience" (2014a: 28). Following this strand of thinking, I would like to suggest that the tension between the particular and the general is not to be regarded as a problem to solve, but as a catalyzer for thought and, more fundamentally, a trademark of human being.

⁹¹ This quote stems from a context in which Duranti asks to what extent people take into account the intention of others, therewith questioning the *universal* salience of intentions for shared actions. He shows that across cultures and social settings, the role of intentions varies widely. I do not object to this, but merely restrict my claims to social realms where intentions *do* play a major role in decoding shared agency.

Where do we go from here? With this reframing of the challenge to navigate between the particular and the general, we are ready to consider the difficulties and assets of Participant Observation through actual participation. On the basis of my participatory fieldwork in Makhanda, South Africa, I investigate and compare peculiarities of different modes of walking together. The goal was to immerse myself into moments where the challenges presented in chapter 1 become virulent, with an eye on the role of shared intention as framed in chapter 2, though the lens of the paradigmatic shared action of walking together discussed in this chapter 3.

What I intended to do, ethnographically, sits uncomfortably between observation and participation. The goal of my qualitative study is to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of specified aspects of human experience through the intensive study of particular cases that include these aspects. I hope to have made clear that I understand fieldwork as an open-ended negotiation and renegotiation of the context one imagines oneself in in order to make sense of a specific situation. My quest, then, centers around the cultural, political and historical aspects of the conditions under which a shared action takes place.

To be clear: I take *observation* and *participation* to be profoundly different, but complementary methods. Since the distinction is only exclusive in theory, but cannot be sharply and artificially maintained within empirical research, it will be most promising to engage in and reflect on the mentioned necessary touching points of both. I will thus be able to evaluate my analytical claim that the perils of participation, with all of its epistemological challenges, can be overcome.

3.6 Conclusion

The argumentation of this chapter was curvy, so let me try to retrace its key findings: We started out with the observation that philosophy depends largely on idealized conceptions of shared action. Following the history of sciences, we found three kinds of idealization: Aristotelian idealization, which picks out the relevant aspects of a phenomenon; Galilean idealization, which distorts elements of the phenomenon in order to make visible others; and “Wittgensteinian”, modest idealization that confines itself to a small portion of examples. The case study of the philosophical example of walking together showed two things: These examples are idealized to a high degree, and some of them contain hidden particulars. With a brief history of walking and walking together, I carved out normative facets of an ideal kind of walking together. These norms are bound to western ideas of, for instance, personhood, public space, gender norms and class. Showing how walking together can also be a method of research, we saw how the apparent problem of

generalization can also be framed as an asset. In this respect, philosophy of action turned out to have a nose for the right kind of example for a shared action: Walking together is a low threshold entry point into the field precisely because it is, in some sense, universally practiced. In this sense, the very traits that make Gilbert choose walking together as a “basic” example for a shared action are traits that make it an effective, superior mode of Participant Observation. Finally, we are left with the reassessed claims about the particular and the general. While there is no clear solution to the problem, I suggest that each case of anthropological field study has its unique conditions that need consideration when the anthropologist moves from the particulars of her experiences to broader claims about what these experiences are instantiations of. The following and final two chapters are themselves experimental offers of how to navigate between the immediateness of experience and the abstraction of its representation.

Chapter 4

Failures on the Ground

4.1 Introduction

Consider an anthropologist who wishes to study post-apartheid South Africa: the living conditions and struggles the Black population still faces on a daily basis; the long-term effects of a dehumanizing system of hierarchical, racist segregation; and its sedimentation in the bodily dispositions of its victims. Considering the strong bodily and spatial dimensions to colonial trauma, it occurs to this researcher that walking together with Black South Africans would be a gainful method by which to perceive the ongoing effects of apartheid on the country's racial majority population. In theory, walking together would function as a form of shared action allowing for participant observation: a context-dependent, participatory act of non-propositional knowledge transfer. But how exactly is this supposed to be put into practice? As established, a shared action occurs when two or more people intentionally do something together. How could our researcher and their walking partners, with their vastly different life experiences, come to have enough overlap in their intentions for their action to count as *shared*?

To sharpen our question, we will start by filling in a few biographical details about our researcher. Let us suppose that this individual is a Swiss woman, white skinned, and in her early thirties. Her race, gender, age, but also her economic status and educational background can each, depending on how and by whom they are perceived, create barriers to shared intentions. Our researcher came to a place where members of different races were legally prohibited to freely do things together for half a century.⁹² Now, in the post-apartheid era, intentional physical proximity is no longer legally sanctioned, but an ever-present sense of division is hovering over the country like toxic smog. Thoughts and feelings of incompatibility, distrust and racialized othering makes it difficult for her to connect with people of different skin color on a level that allows for a shared intention to emerge. On top of that, walking together in South African public space is subject to vastly different rules than our researcher is used to, some of which carry subtle connotations of past and present disparities between Black and white citizens potentially invisible to her, the outsider.

The scenario I have just described might strike the philosopher as a peculiarly special case of Gilbert's "What is it for two people to go for a walk together?" (1990: 2). It is

⁹² Racial segregation existed in South Africa long before the 20th century, but apartheid put both a legal and a nominal stamp on it.

in fact not merely a hypothetical problem, but an accurate representation of the difficulties I encountered whilst conducting my own fieldwork in South Africa. The remaining two chapters of this book are devoted to considering the problems of participation as I experienced it within this context. Understanding the depth and complexity of the problems of participation in post-apartheid South Africa will be the focus of the present chapter. The next and final chapter considers the positive progress made towards their resolution.

In an obvious sense, these closing chapters continue the theme of the preceding chapters: that of critically examining, and ultimately responding to, objections to Participant Observation as a research method. Applying Participant Observation, I empirically tackle the challenges of participation in a notoriously difficult environment for cross-cultural engagement. Yet they mark a fundamental shift in perspective towards these problems. We move from a purely theoretical treatment of participation and shared action to a perspective that considers these concepts in a context that is very much experiential, embodied, and rich with contextual detail. Participation, engagement, intimacy and connection, or the lack thereof, are understood as problems that are lived and subjectively experienced by real people. This shift in perspective grounds the treatment of conceptual and methodological problems surrounding Participant Observation discussed so far by showing how some discoveries are only possible through bodily perception.

At this point, I need to address an important worry one might have about my approach. The worry is that if my fieldwork in South Africa was conducted in order to establish conclusions about philosophical concepts and anthropological methodology, it risks instrumentalizing people's life stories—and hence the people themselves. Their stories would become a means to some further end; they would not matter on their own, a result that would be both unethical and irresponsible. Because the order of chapters might suggest this to be the sequence of thoughts, I need to state clearly that first and foremost, I traveled to Makhanda to investigate the negotiation of public space in post-apartheid South Africa, a quarter century after apartheid ended. I wanted to learn about Black people's everyday lives there, today. I intended to use walking together as a research method to access their perceptual field. In the course of my time there, however, it turned out that the action itself, the walking together, should be the fulcrum of the whole work, and I was able to derive metatheoretical claims from that. In this sense, the order of presentation within the book inverts the order of genesis. The theoretical issues taken up in previous chapters were generated by the problems I describe in these chapters. My interest in the methodological and philosophical issues is the result of the challenges I encountered on the ground—in the course of trying to do justice to the lives of Black South Africans and the suffering they have borne. The aim of this empirical inquiry is thus twofold. First and foremost, these chapters tell the story of the everyday struggles of Black people in South

Africa, taking stock of how their life is still significantly structured through the segregating politics of apartheid. At the same time, it empirically addresses and works through the challenges Participant Observation faces with walking together as a promising, effective methodological mode.

This point about the order of genesis helps to address another important question one might raise: Why think that a small town in South Africa, rather than some other place, should be taken as the case study for an exploration of Participant Observation? The answer to that question can provide no necessary, but only sufficient reasons: I offer a set of context-embedded, realistic and empirically grounded examples of walking together in a place where the methodological perils of participation are obvious and extreme. South Africa represents a cluster of social spaces interspersed with heavy historical baggage, racial and spatial segregation and asymmetric power relations. The lifeworld and everyday practices of the people in Makhanda, like South Africa more generally, are fundamentally shaped by its history and its country's politics, and the hidden pre-text of the past has a large impact on shared everyday practices, like walking together. These circumstances make South Africa a rough place to live—but an excellent place to study the perils of participation. I am certainly not suggesting, however, that it is the only place or even the *best* place to study problems of Participant Observation. Nor am I suggesting that the barriers I encountered in South Africa are exhaustive or typical problems of participation. There are so many ways in which people, including those coming from very similar cultural settings, can encounter barriers to connection. Racialized division is one way in which participation becomes an issue, but the problem of participation is not about race. In this sense, the results of my research have a point of focus which can be shifted to other domains of social disparities.

The plan for this chapter is as follows. The first three sections lay out basic information about my research: the historical context surrounding the beginning and end of apartheid (4.2); the methodology of walking together as a way of observing the ongoing effects of apartheid on Black South Africans (4.3); and the scope of my research (4.4). I then describe my initial research period (4.5), introducing my main research partners by means of walking vignettes; portraying situations from their everyday lives; and analyzing the circumstances under which participation failed to work due to insufficient common intentions and conceptual convergence of walking together. I will call myself out for unreflecting flâneusehood and lack of perceptual awareness of what matters. By the end of this chapter, the reader should be sufficiently familiar with the context of my field site to see the beginning of how I gradually came to form new perceptual habits, overcame some of my initial failures, and gradually turned into a participant.

4.2 Research focus: post-apartheid South Africa

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

— William Faulkner (1951: 73)

To understand the present, we need to know something about the past. The rise and fall of apartheid mark a period where rights to freely engage in shared actions were sanctioned and then finally reinstated. But the living politics of post-apartheid South Africa embody an ongoing divide. The long-term effects of apartheid are not marginal or subtle, but brutally impose themselves in plain sight. Dehumanizing living conditions for the larger part of the Black population are still the norm today and create seemingly insurmountable social barriers between Black and white, pushing each individual into a stiff role. Apartheid's impact on South Africa's present population is painfully present in every interaction I have experienced. This section will flag some of the key historical events that shaped the present situation of the country—in particular, the historical developments that initially led to the implementation of apartheid laws (4.2.1 and 4.2.2) and the proclamation of South Africa as the “rainbow nation” following its democratization in 1994 (4.2.3 and 4.2.4). At the same time, it also provides a representative account of the kind of knowledge I possessed about South Africa before stepping foot in the country, and which partly motivated my decision to conduct my fieldwork there.

4.2.1 South Africa before apartheid

For thousands of years, people from different ethnic groups have been living in Southern Africa. The history of South Africa as told in conventional Western scholarship, however, started in 1652—when the Dutch East India Company established a trading post in what is now Cape Town. From then on, there was a steadily increasing influx of white settlers (“Boers”), together with their slaves imported from African and Asian countries, into the Dutch Cape Colony.

After many decades of political and military upheaval, the Cape became a British colony in 1814. There followed a century of conflict between the British and the Boers that, at least in the eyes of Europeans, overshadowed the conflict between the white colonizing minority and the Black population majority—the latter having been the target of racially exclusive and discriminatory policies and laws under both British and Boer rule (Hamilton, Mbenga and Ross 2009). In a mass migration movement that later became known as the “Great Trek”, Boer settlers advanced further into the inland to escape British influence and founded several independent Boer republics, disappropriating land from the Black population to do so. In the Boer War of 1899 to 1902, (also referred to as the South-African

War in South African scholarly articles, to acknowledge the suffering and participation of all South Africans), triggered by gold and diamond discoveries, Britain ultimately defeated the Boer republics, turning them into British colonies (Nasson 2014). In 1910, the Union of South Africa was founded as a white-ruled, self-governing nation state within the British Empire. It was during this time period that Afrikaners—as the descendants of Dutch and Huguenot Boer settlers eventually became known—began to formulate their political and racial identity in opposition to Anglo-Saxon whiteness. In the historiography of this period, South Africa's colonized Black natives were largely cut out, despite making up the vast majority of the population. Often, their only mention was in passing reference to their role as a rupturing force, complicating negotiations between British imperial and Boer interests.

Four years later, World War I erupted. By the end of this war, South Africa's civil society was exhausted after an epidemic of the Spanish Flu, lack of food and infrastructure (Marx 2012: 100-108). While Black people constituted most of the population, they were only allowed to inhabit a fraction of the land and were systematically denied voting rights and other basic civil liberties. Living circumstances were worsened by poor interracial social cohesion and missing communal solidarity beyond peoples' cultural and racial background (Crapanzano 1985: x-xix). As the interwar period brought about more supply shortfall, just as it did everywhere else, the country's poorest citizens—mainly the Black population—suffered the most.⁹³ In the mid-1920s, the state initiated the localization of industrial production, which ruptured longstanding trade agreements among the territories of southern Africa. By the 1930s, South Africa had become an industrializing power, but the effects of the Great Depression only served to further exacerbate conflict between Afrikaner settlers and British colonial powers, both eager to enlarge their territories (Martin 1990) and to compete with rival brands of white nationalistic identity imaginary of South African statehood (Marx 2012).

The outbreak of the Second World War evoked a heated conflict between the pro-Afrikaner, anti-British National Party (NP) and the pro-British South African Party (SAP), who disagreed over whether South Africa should support the allied forces or the Nazis. Ultimately, Prime Minister Jan Smuts successfully coalesced support for the British war efforts, although he paid a high political price for this victory. His closeness to the British made him unpopular amongst the majority of Afrikaners and precipitated his eventual downfall—leading to the ascent of nationalist Afrikanerdom and the election of the NP into power in 1948 (ibid.; Ross, Mager and Nasson 2011).

⁹³ With shockingly few exceptions, historical records of the South African War and the impact of the World Wars on South Africa focus on the encounters of the colonial powers and in large part leave out how the vast majority of the country's population, the colonized Black natives, fought and lived during that period. The absence of a historical narrative of a country's oppressed civil society is not a special problem of historiography on South Africa. Rather, it seems to me, this circumstance expresses history's long-standing self-understanding as an academic enterprise led by scholars from colonizing countries. For exceptions, see Ross (2008 [1997]) and Marx (2012), although, as Premesh Lalu rhetorically asks and discusses in his homonymous paper: "When was South African history ever postcolonial?" (2008: 267).

4.2.2 Living politics under apartheid

The NP won the upper hand in national government with campaign pledges concerning support for (mainly poor) Afrikaners. As a means to this end, they proposed a system of government-sanctioned racial segregation—enshrining into law what was already a practical reality in most parts of the country.

The argument mounted in favor of “apartheid”, as this system was called, was culturalist. Under the official rationale of “separate development”, the core claim was that Black South Africans should not be entitled to citizenship because they belonged elsewhere, in “tribal homelands of their own” (MacDonald 2006: 49). In defense against allegations of racism and exploitation, an ideology of healthy, natural, mutually beneficial separation of races and cultures was postulated and fostered. It is worth noting, however, that separation was always only ever partial, going only as far as was convenient for the white population. As maids, gardeners and servants, white people kept Black people close-by. Apartheid was not truly committed to keeping races isolated. Michael MacDonald points out that the ideology of separate development was shaped to justify the rightlessness of Black people inside South Africa, all while “preserving and justifying the domination of whites over Blacks. Domination, however, entails involvement, connectedness, and relatedness, not separation and apartness” (2006: 49). The culturalist argument was never intended to be about equality under separation, but about hierarchical exploitation.

Once in power, the NP immediately started implementing a first set of apartheid laws, which established the new government structure and officially institutionalized white minority rule and the segregation and disenfranchisement of the Black population. Three legislations in particular had a profound impact. The first was the *Race Classification Act*, which ruled that every citizen suspected of not being European was classified according to race. The second was the *Mixed Marriages Act*, which prohibited marriage between people of different races. The third was the *Group Areas Act*, which led to racial rezoning, forcing millions of people of certain races into living in designated areas and ruralizing Black workers when not on the job. This also meant, for instance, that “Blacks” and “Coloureds” were required to carry legal documentation in “White” areas.⁹⁴ Apart from not being allowed to enter most restaurants and public toilets, they were also banned from beaches, parks and other government-owned recreational spaces.

From the beginning, apartheid was met with internal resistance, ranging from organized civil disobedience, strikes and demonstrations to spontaneous uprisings to armed guerilla warfare. Protest was often brutally suppressed by the government, its

⁹⁴ In order to maintain racial division and impose white supremacy, the South African government distinguished between four main racial groups: White South Africans (formally classified as “European”), Black South Africans (formally classified as “Native”, “Bantu”, or “African”), Coloureds (formally classified as “mixed”) and Indians (formally classified as “Asian”).

organizations criminalized, and its leaders incarcerated. Yet, combined with increasing international sanctions, it paved the way for an end of the racist system of rule. The democratic transition began in the 1990s, under international pressure, triggered by swelling nation-wide protests and rising political influence of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC). A rash of political turmoil reached its peak with a series of violent acts between the ANC and Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) (Thompson 2001). The winds of change blew up a storm, and dreams of a rainbow nation began to appear on the horizon (Guelke 2005, Dubow 2014).

4.2.3 Dreams of a “rainbow nation” and the “born free”

In 1994, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa's first democratically elected president. During the so-called honeymoon period, hopes of a better life for everyone rose. The idea of a “rainbow nation” under this new democracy floated through the country and spread worldwide through the global press.⁹⁵ Redressing structural inequality within the South African society in the post-apartheid era was supposed to be the major task of the first democratic government of South Africa, and new policies on social and economic transformation were promised.

Since then, 26 years have passed. The first children born after Mandela's ascent to power have come of age. The international press, including the Washington Post and the BBC, have called them the generation of the born-frees (Bearak 2019). In 2019, they made up nearly 40 percent of the population.

The ANC has dominated South African politics as the ruling party until today. Yet the economic legacy of apartheid endures. Nearly three decades of corruption and mismanagement at the hands of local and national politicians alike have taken their toll. During his single term as president, Mandela had faced enormous political and economic challenges, legal and constitutional constraints, and left the conduct of government increasingly to his deputy and successor, Tambo Mbeki, who used his presidency internationally to call for an end to “global apartheid”, a term he coined to describe the disparity between a small minority of rich nations and a great number of impoverished states in the world. On a national level, however, Mbeki was involved in numerous controversies regarding allegations of promoting economic policies that only benefited a small Black elite and suppressing public debate on crime and AIDS. He was succeeded by Jacob Zuma, president between 2009 and 2018, who made regular headlines for racketeering, fraud and corruption.

⁹⁵ Before Mandela began popularizing the term “rainbow nation”, it was coined by then Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, who used it as a metaphor for a multi-racial protest crowd in 1989. See Allen (2006): 391.

In 2019, Cyril Ramaphosa took over as president. A former anti-apartheid activist, but also a businessman criticized for the conduct of personal commercial interests while in office, Ramaphosa has a difficult political standing. On the one hand, he improved the national political atmosphere with the promise of “a new dawn” and a vow to actively fight corruption (Sadia and Patel 2020: 5). On the other hand, there has been little progress in the promised directions (ibid.: 5-9). Mounting national debt, currently enlarged through the COVID-19-pandemic, further impedes a rigorous redistribution and investment in education programs.

In effect, little redistribution has taken place. The school system has received insufficient funding. Black, cheap labor still is everywhere: In white homes as gardeners, nannies, maids; in white living areas on construction sites, at the check-out and the gas station. A quarter of a decade after the end of apartheid, the World Bank reports that, with regards to both income and wealth distribution, South Africa is the world’s most unequal country.⁹⁶ Unsurprisingly, the tremendous class/race overlap persists. A friend from the sociology department, herself a coloured South African woman in her late 40s, remarked that “the correlation between the skin tone and economic status is uncanny: the lighter the richer, the darker the poorer.” What she meant by rich is not only the amount of money in the bank, but the whole Bourdieuan package that, besides economic capital, includes social resources in the sense of a reliable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual recognition and cultural capital linked to a person’s upbringing and education and the acquirement of intellectual skills that provides advantage in achieving a higher status in society.⁹⁷

As migration from other African countries increased, racism between Black South African citizens and Black African immigrants did, too. In 2008, Makhanda made national news due to a series of xenophobic attacks, lootings and pogroms against African and Indian migrants. Jobs were scarce and Black South Africans afraid of even cheaper labor offered by educated migrants from neighbor countries with egalitarian school systems, but soaring economies.

The dream of a rainbow nation seemed shattered, being seen as a failed project by many young, especially Black South Africans. As international political pressure steadily decreased, South Africa’s Black population was given the image of a free generation in charge of their own destiny, but forced into a waiting position.

⁹⁶ For detailed graphs on global and national wealth and income distribution, see Scott and Pettersson (2019), working with numbers and statistics of the World Bank (2018).

⁹⁷ See *The Forms of Capital* (1985, especially 46-58), where Bourdieu identifies three categories of capital.

4.2.4 South Africa today

A country grappling with change, South Africa is now home to its first generation having grown up without explicit government-sanctioned segregation and economic restrictions. Yet the country's past is still omnipresent and forcefully visible in the form of racial divisions: Black versus white. In larger cities with exclusive, gated communities on the one side and extensive, ever-expanding townships on the other, worlds intersect mostly in the form of impersonal transactions. Black people work for white people; they pack their groceries, guard their cars, cook their dinners and paint their houses. Public space is dominated by drivers, not pedestrians, and cars are primarily afforded by white people. Although a Black middle class is on the rise, interracial groups in bars and restaurants still turn heads and mixed couples appear exceptional. As Panashe Chigumadzi, a Black Zimbabwean journalist who grew up in South Africa, explains in an interview with the BBC in 2015, "South Africa is a cappuccino society. [...] A vast, huge, Black majority at the bottom with a layer of white cream and a few chocolate sprinklings at the top of it" (Leithead 2015). Chigumadzi is referring to the small Black South African elite who has profited from the failed attempt to rebalance wealth among the many during the first post-apartheid years: "The 'add Blacks and stir' model of society here hasn't worked" (ibid.). The Black/white division in the big South African cities is visible *ex negativo*, in the sense that depending on the neighborhood, you will exclusively see either one or the other. In the city centers, where races meet in the service sector, the visibility of division is not spatial in the way described above, but captured in the form of interracial interaction. There is little desegregating doing *with*, and much segregating doing *for*: interactions are typically under the banner of capital transaction, not friendship. What might look like an interracial shared action, in this framework, is rarely done for the sake of spending time together, but put in the service of service.

Technically, democracy delivered freedom to all South Africans a quarter of a century ago. In practice, however, the legacy of apartheid endures in the segregation of shared actions. What it means for two people to engage in an act as simple as going for a walk together will, intentionally or not, depend on the color of their skin. The methodological ramifications of this circumstance will be discussed just now.

4.3 Research methodology

Right before their "empirical chapter", ethnographies tend to have a "methodology chapter", or prelude, where the researcher's choice of method is justified and backed up with references to methodology books. Since this book is in large part an inquiry about anthropological methodology, however, the choice of method has a special status as put

into question from the outset. Thus, I am investigating the enduring effects of post-apartheid South Africa through the methodology of walking together—where it is understood that the effectiveness of the methodology is itself a joint target of the investigation. With that said, there are certain considerations that recommend this particular form of Participant Observation as being in principle ideally well-suited to explore this particular subject.

How does the experience of a habitual, everyday practice of walking connect with the colonial history of South Africa? Here, I will discuss three key considerations: the conditions of sharing a perceptual field; the bodily sedimentation of colonial memory; and my rhetorical strategies and use of vignettes.

4.3.1 Sharing a perceptual field

I have already noted that most anthropological approaches implementing walking together as a method of research focus on its offering of a shared perceptual field. Walking together, in this view, becomes a (literal and metaphorical) vehicle to explore terrain ‘with the eyes’ of those who know it. Following this insight, I sought to follow my research partners’ gaze as we walked together: Where would they look? What would they point to? Which parts of our shared surrounding would they pick up in conversation? When walking together, the ostensive gesture of pointing and the verbal expression of interest for an object within sensory reach receives an additional, motoric dimension in the form of the direction one takes, but also the adjustment of speed depending on what seems important, beautiful or dangerous: We might slow down or even pause when something attracts our attention, walk towards the beautiful and bypass the unwanted.

Another perceptual aspect that comes to the forefront when two people go for a walk together is who takes the lead. Context-specific power relations between two walking partners can be negotiated explicitly in the form of a preparatory discussion, but it might well remain in the non-propositional realm who dominates the tempo, decides on the route and final destination and on appropriate times to stop and go. I took this aspect into consideration in that I deliberately withdrew myself from dominating these decisions and let my research partners characterize the nature of the walk. Sharing a perceptual field, then, does not only mean to follow the others’ gaze, but also to be sensitive towards their mode of walking. Paying attention to the quality of the shared bodily movement itself turned out to be a rich source for non-propositional knowledge. It will thus also be *through* walking together from where my arguments will unfold.

Finally, let me add an aspect specifically relevant to the South African context whose history is marked by the racist contestation and control of public space. Walking freely for Black people has long been restricted to certain areas, and prohibited in others.

While officially, all such restrictions and bans have been lifted, relics of these oppressive laws of spatial segregation are still present all over the country, where, depending on the neighborhood, Black people—especially those not dressed according to at least middleclass standards—are shown that they are not welcome. This might be done by hostile looks, confrontative questioning by “concerned neighbors” or police and private security controls. However, things change once a white person is present. Walking together with *me*, for a Black person, meant to be perceived as a beneficiary of my privilege in the sense that together, we could go places they could, or would, not go in the absence of white company. I would have to take into account that my very presence as a white European woman—with the confidence instilled by thirtysomething years of taken-for-granted freedom to go wherever she pleases—influenced the way walking and perceiving the world together worked out for me and my research partners, who themselves were grappling with bodily instantiations of oppression.

4.3.2 Bodily instantiations of oppression

Colonial memory is sedimented in the habitual practice of walking together. In this sense, the past is not past, but very much alive, embodied in the everyday movement of the descendants of those who endured it.

I have mentioned in chapter 1 that a number of scholars have taken up the notion of habitus and bodily knowledge to explore them as expressions of cultural ways of being (Mauss 1934, Bourdieu 1977, Csordas 1990). I have noted that the subdiscipline anthropology of the body, which emerged out of this theoretical scaffold, associates bodily practices to the wider context of people’s cultural and social history and includes reflections not only about, but also *through* the body (Wikan 1991, Kleinman and Kleinman 1994). Accordingly, there is a connection between the corporeal and the social or, as Kleinman and Kleinman put it, “the incorporation of the social body into the physical body” (1994: 708).

How should this theory be adapted in the field? Posing the question of how to relate bodily dispositions to societal background, I am here interested in the sub-question of how colonial memory is sedimented in an everyday, habitual practice like walking together. Rather than following the mainstream line of anthropology of the body into phenomenological terrain, let me flag two accounts that productively altered the landscape of the anthropology of the body. Each in their own way, they flesh out how colonial memories endure generations in the bodies of individuals and how bodily habits are passed on on a collective level, through participation.

Paul Connerton attributes the bodily dimension of habit to tradition and cultural memory. In *How Societies Remember* (1989), he compellingly discloses how the past

manifests in our bodies.⁹⁸ By treating memory as a cultural and collective rather than an individual faculty, Connerton provides an account of how bodily practices are transmitted in and as traditions: “Our bodies, which in commemorations stylistically re-enact an image of the past, keep the past also in an entirely effective form in their continuing ability to perform certain skilled actions” (ibid.: 72). In this way, Connerton brings out the connection between cultural practice and memorized habits, in which “the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body” (ibid.: 72). Dwelling on the meaning of rituals, Connerton notes that our bodies, “which in commemorations stylistically re-enact an image of the past, keep the past also in an entirely effective form in their continuing ability to perform certain skilled actions” (ibid.). While this statement is mainly meant to explain the significance of rituals and their traditional bodily execution, it can be adapted for everyday practices as well. I suggest that walking, too, inhabits intergenerational memory. A habitus can endure generations of bodies, *in* bodies, sedimented not just in visible features, but in everyday practices. Walking is such an incorporating practice entrenched by collective bodily memory.

While the proposition that the social is shaped by our being embodied is accepted in anthropological scholarship today, many studies mix—or, perhaps, confuse—the socio-bodily and the textual and representational hermeneutics. Physical bodies are treated like texts, ready to be deciphered. This to me appears to be a theoretical setback because it returns to the hierarchical model of scholarly observations about other people’s bodily behavior instead of participatory anthropology *through* the body. While the reverse conclusion, that text interpretation is also a bodily experience, was an important expansion of the ethnographic project (which is explored in detail by affect theory), the assumption that bodies can be read like texts bears the problem of narrowing empirical investigations down to the exploration of propositional content. For texts are, by definition, propositional. Connerton put his finger on this problem by introducing the distinction between *inscribing* and *incorporating* practices. Central to his argument is the claim that the body is socially constituted in a double sense, namely through inscription on the one hand and incorporation on the other. Inscription as a social practice includes the storage of texts, photographs, audio and so forth, which “traps and holds information, long after the human organism has stopped informing” (1989: 73). From a western perspective, inscribing practice resembles the privileged domain of memory. Connerton asserts that the rise of hermeneutics, with its mission to re-interpret mostly text, has led to an interpretation preference of the inscribed over the incorporated. “Inscribing practices”, following Connerton, “have always formed the privileged story, incorporating practices the neglected

⁹⁸ For a complementary account on cultural memory and identity with focus on scripture, see Assmann (1992). For an examination of cultural memory in transition from totalitarian to democratic systems, see Assmann and Shortt (eds.) (2012).

story, in the history of hermeneutics” (1989: 100-101). Inscription is thus how societies are normally thought to remember the past.⁹⁹

The latter notion, incorporation, includes all sorts of body postures and facial expressions, but also habituated practices like table manners, the physical exchange of greetings—or, to take up my own example: walking together. Through incorporating practice, memory is “passed on in non-textual and non-cognitive ways” (ibid.: 102-103).

Building on Connerton’s theory, Paul Stoller argues in more detail how embodiment is not mainly textual. Laying focus on the sensual dimension of perception, Stoller stresses that the body is “a major repository of cultural memories” (1994: 638). To gain access to this layer of bodily knowledge, he had already argued earlier for what he called *thick participation* (1989), which appreciates the significance of *all* senses for Participant Observation, but also acknowledges that the researcher’s body, too, is socially constituted and thus accustomed to specific ways of perception. Stoller called for a radical immersion through participation into the sensual realm of the field and to sharpen one’s own senses in accordance with the “savory sauces” of ethnographic life.¹⁰⁰ With a detailed discussion on the merits of ethnographers using their bodies as research tools to access the perceptual element of the lifeworlds of other people, Stoller underlines the sensuous dimension of participation. Focusing on the example of Songhai spirit possession, he summarizes his observation by saying that “cultural memories are embedded in the smells, sounds and sight of Songhai spirit possession ceremonies” (1994: 642), arguing “that spirit possession is an incontestably embodied phenomenon that triggers a myriad of cultural memories” (ibid.: 642). Stoller once more builds on Connerton by adding that those memories are never purely personal, cognitive, or textual. Rather, “the sentient body is culturally consumed by a world filled with forces, smells, textures, sights, sounds and tastes, all of which trigger cultural memories” (ibid.: 636).¹⁰¹

We can adapt this line of thought and connect it with the above established notion of walking together as a vehicle to a shared perceptual field. Taking seriously Connerton’s and Stoller’s pleas for a more holistic treatment of the sensuous dimensions of participation, I frame walking together as a (literal and metaphorical) vehicle to explore terrain not only ‘with the eyes’ of those who know it, but also, gradually, with their feet.

⁹⁹ Many have drawn on the idea to integrate the body as self-evident part of lived experience. See for instance Wacquant 2004 and Sennett 2008 and 2012. For a theoretical anchor, see Okely 2012 and Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, who are heeding both incorporating and inscribing practices.

¹⁰⁰ On the back cover of *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989), Stoller complains that “[a]nthropologists who have lost their senses write ethnographies that are often disconnected from the worlds they seek to portray. For most anthropologists, tasteless theories are more important than the savory sauces of ethnographic life”.

¹⁰¹ However, Stoller finds fault with Connerton’s take on bodily memory for ignoring the “sentient body in possession” (ibid.: 637) and “emotional memory” (ibid.: 640), therewith laying the foundation for his work on sensuous scholarship (1997).

4.3.3 The significance of vignettes

Finally, a word about my rhetorical strategies, which are of fundamental methodological significance. As discussed in chapter 1, a vignette-style rhetoric adapted in ethnographies has become a trademark of the qualitative interpretative approach of Participant Observation and plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between the particular and the general. To analyze the practice of walking together I have adopted such a qualitative interpretive approach, recollecting my experience in daily a posteriori notes (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 84-86). Gradually, I turned bits and pieces of my messy fieldwork notes, drawings of maps and scenes into explanatory, general remarks and vignettes that focus on key moments or persons. My interpretations of the encounters I chose to portray in vignette style are based on and coherent with the broader knowledge on South Africa I have gathered over the last five years. The vignettes condense experiences deemed to be typical and should be viewed as crystallization points. Methodologically, this is where the qualitative nature of Participant Observation surfaces, for it is not a standardized number of representative occurrences of a specific event that determine what becomes a vignette. Rather, the vignette *paints* a representative picture. This quality of the vignette as a *show-don't-tell* writing technique also concerns the issue of non-propositional knowledge. While this separate challenge will be the focus of the next chapter, I should mention its dependence on vignettes in the context of explaining my rhetorical strategies. The reader might have wondered: Is the anthropologist's job, as she returns to the armchair, to *translate* this knowledge into the propositional realm? While at times this might be so, it misses the point of vignettes. They certainly contain propositions, but their function is not to convey propositional knowledge in the sense that vignettes present a propositional argument for a conclusion. Rather, they offer an experience of literary character. Vignettes are essentially evocative, not descriptive, allowing the text to act as a subjective interpretation of events. With this strategy, I, the ethnographer, seek to break with the authoritative gesture of objectifying, protocolic description.

4.4 Research scope and location

Overall, I spent 13 months in South Africa between 2015 and 2019, 12 of which were in Makhanda. Each period was between 2 and 3 months long, together covering the seasonal spectrum of a full year.¹⁰² My focus group was Black South African women around my age, which meant that they went to school, came of age, started families and careers after apartheid had ended in 1994. I confined my study to women so as to allow bonds less likely

¹⁰² Covering a full annual cycle allowed me to experience walking together in all seasons, during the annual spectacle of the National Arts Festival, the holiday season, and the academic semesters.

to be romanticized or sexualized. As walking together can be a way of creating intimate space in public, walking with women minimized suspicion of flirtatious intents in a small town where rumors grow like mushrooms. Another reason why I decided to focus on women is that my preliminary armchair research showed that women are, for different reasons, more likely to be on the move during the day: Female household headship has generally been on the increase in South Africa, and is associated with higher poverty incidence when compared to male household headship because women still earn significantly less and have less access to economic opportunities than men (Nwosu and Ndinda 2018). Given their responsibility in childcare and the overall management of their own household, they are often forced to accept lower paying jobs that allow them more flexible time management, which in turn enables them to also carry out unpaid household work. In effect, they work more jobs, walking from door to door, changing professional hats as seamstresses, fruit sellers, service workers or nannies several times a day. Black South African women work and walk a lot, and I wanted to tell their stories.

Economic segregation rules every aspect of South African public life. This claim holds not only for South Africa's larger cities, but also for its smaller towns. However, the latter facilitate more personal connections through sheer spatial proximity as public space is less anonymous. Walking in the context of a small town is not just a free mode of commuting and a statement of poverty, but a reasonable option for getting around for everyone. Visibility and capital transactions become gradually more personal because Black and white individuals regularly see, recognize and deal with each other. The shared use of one post office, for instance, sets a minimum of intersection and a basic point of commonality.

I opted for Makhanda on the recommendation of several South Africans whom I discussed my project with.¹⁰³ A city of roughly 70,000 inhabitants and 65 km², Makhanda is the largest town in the *Makana Municipality*, situated in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Its Black population is nearly 80%. The rest is almost equally white and coloured.¹⁰⁴ Makhandians who were by law racially segregated until 1994 live in close proximity of a small community. Although practically still segregated into Black, coloured and white living spaces through tremendous economic inequality, Makhandians, so I was told, know each other. Unlike bigger cities' townships—for instance Soweto in

¹⁰³ Special thanks to James Merron for helping me pick Makhanda as my field site and taking me under his wings for a first visit in 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Coloureds are a multiracial ethnic group of South Africa with ancestry from more than one of the various populations inhabiting Southern Africa. According to the most recent census (2011), the population of Makhanda was 67,264, of whom 78.9% described themselves as Black African, 11.3% as Coloured and 8.4% as White. The first language of 72.2% of the population is Xhosa, while for 13.7% it is Afrikaans and for 10.8% English. There is a strong correlation between race and first language. The majority of Black Makhandians are Xhosa and speak isiXhosa. Typically, Coloureds speak Afrikaans, while Whites speak either Afrikaans or English (which explains the higher percentage of Afrikaans speaking people compared with the percentage of Whites). Preparing for my everyday encounters, I thought it to be paramount to acquire at least some conversational skills in isiXhosa. Apart from simple greetings and courtesies, it was at that time in-existent. As it turned out, however, English was dominantly spoken in shops, at Rhodes University and as a white person I was always addressed in English.

Johannesburg or Khayelitsha in Cape Town—Makhanda’s township, located on a hill, is never out of sight. Crucially for the potential merging of social spaces, everything is within walking distance, which allowed me to focus on the social distance emerging despite spatial proximity.

At first glance, Makhanda seems to be a sleepy student town, quaint and run down at the same time. It is home to Rhodes, one of the country’s most prestigious universities, and to several national elite private high schools, attracting upper middle-class families from all over the country as well as international students. At the same time, the largest part of the town consists of a township, stretching over the entire eastern part of the city. Like everywhere in South Africa, the small district area is still grappling with its legacy of division from apartheid. For the most part, people continued to live in the same neighborhoods as they did when the system of racial segregation was legally intact.

While some of my acquaintances talk about the town like a sort of microcosm of South Africa, others insisted on its uniqueness. Makhanda’s history affirms both perspectives equally, as it bears witness to nation-building, critical events and incommensurable suffering. Grahamstown was founded as a military headquarter in 1812 during a war waged by the British against the amaXhosa, and grew as a settler town from 1820 onward. As voluntary arrival swell, the forced relocation of Africans to the immediate Grahamstown area during the 1830s and 1840s spurred the colonial government’s decision to set up the first official African “locations” in Grahamstown, thus administering a racial separation of housing areas. At the time, Africans were officially considered “foreigners” in the Cape Colony. Through the second half of the nineteenth century, fear and suspicion of Africans arriving in Grahamstown from further East on the advancing colonial frontier inflected the particular racism of the town and region. In this racist view, in which to be African meant to live perpetually on the edge of criminality, to be “more African”, from the rural frontier, was considered more inferior.

In the first years of the twentieth century, white town administrators branded “unemployed” people and “squatters” as the primary problem in town. These classifications rendered most Africans illegal immigrants, since employment was mandatory for a living permit in both the government locations and the newer municipal locations at the time. At the same time, in order to get a living permit, one required an employment contract (Schmidt 1996: 144-158). These and other laws and categories created by the British made it impossible for the Black population to gain legal status. Numerous persecutions resulted from this.¹⁰⁵ The spatial marginalization of Black (South) Africans persists until today.

¹⁰⁵ For instance, the *Grahamstown Journal* (which before 1864 was simply called the *Journal*) reported in 1908 that police were “carrying on a regular crusade against squatters and vagrants in the city locations” (*Grahamstown Journal*: 1908).

With a high population density, poor living conditions and an unemployment rate above 40%, thousands of Black people live in close-packed makeshift shacks, in which several family members share a single room constituting the home. Meanwhile, the city center with its Victorian style houses, brick and mortar, with bathrooms and installed electricity, is predominantly white.

The racial politics and ongoing post-apartheid tension of Makhanda can be illustrated with recent developments concerning the name of the city. Until September 2018, Makhanda's official English name was Grahamstown. The city was called after its founder, Colonel John Graham (1778-1821), who commanded some of the forces of the British colonial project in the Eastern Cape during the Cape Frontier Wars (1779-1879), including a series of military campaigns to subjugate the native tribe of the amaXhosa, which still today makes up the largest part of the population in the Eastern Cape. In the course of increased awareness of structural oppression, the governmental *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* that was set up by the national justice department in 1995 recommended the renaming of geographic places as a form of 'symbolic reparation', and so Grahamstown was to be renamed after the umXhosa warrior, sangoma and prophet Makhanda ka Nxele.¹⁰⁶ The eponymous hero led an attack of resistance against the British battalion at Egazini, then the city's south-western side, in 1819 (Independent Online 2019).

The name change was instigated by the local council and rejected by many. There still is strong opposition against the name change, and the majority of Makhandians see themselves as Grahamstownians. On an institutional level, a formation of citizens, *Keep Grahamstown Grahamstown* (KGG), formed numerous formal complaints, deeming the name change undesirable because of historical sentiments, cost implications and a lack of consultation (HeraldLIVE: 2018). More recently, triggered by the *#RhodesMustFall* movements, the Rhodes University Council was pressured to respond to growing criticism concerning the name of the institution, which was initially chosen to honor Cecil Rhodes, an ardent believer in British colonialism who served as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896.¹⁰⁷ The council voted against a name change for the institution in 2017, the official reason being financial constraints. Since then, a growing number of students have started calling their home institution "The University currently known as Rhodes".

Perhaps not surprisingly, the people most directly affected by structural oppression were largely unimpressed by the symbolic gesture that was the city's name change. The general sense I got when speaking with township dwellers was that a name change would at best, and probably, change nothing, at worst hurt their businesses and their sense of

¹⁰⁶ In South Africa, a sangoma is a traditional healer who takes up an important social and political role in Xhosa communities. She or he is meant to heal physical, emotional and spiritual illnesses, guide rituals, counteract witchcraft, and pass on traditional history, cosmology, and myths.

¹⁰⁷ *#RhodesMustFall* is a protest movement that began in March 2015. It was originally directed against a statue commemorating Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, which was subsequently removed in April 2015. The campaign led to a wider movement aimed to decolonize education across South Africa.

belonging. Daluxolo¹⁰⁸, a young single mother of four, told me: *Grahamstown is my home, and people know where it is and that it is a good place for me and my family. Nobody wants to stop in “Makhanda”.*

With the name change, a specific imaginary about amaXhosa tradition is presently inserted into the historical past of the town. But the received opinion of people currently living in the city is that the name change not only misses the point, but hurts the cause of fighting inequality. Many township dwellers—older apartheid-born and younger “free-born”—agreed with, and signed petitions launched by the KGG, who in turn publicized photos of and statements by Black supporters of their cause. Evidently, it was important to the members of KGG to position themselves not as white reactionaries, but as a mouthpiece for the suppressed. And they did share part of the worries of the township dwellers, which were twofold: The cost of the name change and its possible effects on the local economy on the one hand and the blurring over of historical facts on the other.¹⁰⁹ Strolling down Dr Jacob Zuma Drive (until 2011 known as Raglan Road), Daluxolo points to the lower, poorer parts of the township and asks: *Is this Makhanda?! If the war ended with us winning, it would not be like this.* Apart from some of my philosophy graduate students at Rhodes, whose email signature ends with “The University currently known as Rhodes”, I did not encounter one Black person in town who supported the name change. People were either against it or, like Sinazo, a middle-aged grocery packer for 15 years and proud grandmother of 3, largely indifferent. The fruit seller Zinzi, on the other hand, pointed out: *We walk the streets of Grahamstown. But not all streets, we still don’t belong in some neighborhoods. That is the present story and it is the long story of the past.* What is the story here? The narrative, the self-understanding of the people who make the city, is under scrutiny, the idea of giving it a Xhosa name induces a fear of a forgetting of the past, and an invention of a narrative that cuts out the long and still lasting history of racism and structural inequality. On February 4th, 2020, the name change appeal was set for High Court (Grocott’s Mail: 2020), and dismissed shortly after. Now, the English name of this town is Makhanda, while its isiXhosa name—which, ironically enough, did not make the short list of names to be considered—remains iRhini.

4.5 Initial research period: failures of a flâneuse

I had arrived for my first 3-month period of study a complete outsider, with an empty notebook, a sturdy laptop and naïve verve. After a fortnight of shy rambles around what

¹⁰⁸ To maintain anonymity, all my research partners are referenced under pseudonyms.

¹⁰⁹ In *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Eric Hobsbawm argues that traditions can be used as a political instrument to change current policies (1983; esp. 4-5). It will be interesting to see in what way the name change also changes the narrative of the city’s future.

was considered the “safe zone” of the village center, I first set foot into Makhanda’s township on a drizzly winter’s day.

Very quickly I was hit with the certainty that everything I intended to do was a terrible idea. So this is what post-apartheid poverty for Black South Africans looks like. Haggled shacks on muddy hills, a foot march away from this other world I had easy access to, a world of solid houses with water and light and warmth and white people with jobs and fridges full of food. Of course, I had studied for this. I was aware of the lasting effects of apartheid. I knew Black people still suffered. I had consulted statistics, watched documentaries, plowed through history books and ethnographies. Yet the division in this tiny town was so much more explicit, so much more in-my-face than I had the stomach for. A woman I estimated to be around my age, bony thin and clothed for a summer’s day, hobbled towards me as I approached a crossing, crying harrowingly, begging me to leave her my jacket and boots. She was shivering, one foot in a plastic bag, the other wrapped in tin foil. Emotionally paralyzed and horrorstruck by my inability to do the right thing—or to know what the right thing was—I gave her my scarf and change, which she took and left. I faltered back down the muddy hill, downtown, found a dim corner in a bar, pulled out the credit card I had hidden in my bra and got horribly drunk. I had three months to get things going, and after two weeks had only one thought left: If anything, I will have to write about my failures to share in an action.

The next day I stopped by the Rhodes philosophy department, introduced my project and was warmly welcomed into the philosophers’ community, which was eager to discuss necessary and sufficient conditions for walking together. Grateful and reluctant at the same time, I moved into an office with a view to the main road. An observer after all. Although I still did my daily rounds and tried to be a good anthropologist, “immersing” myself into “the field” and “collecting data”, it seemed pointless and beside the point at the same time to stick to my initial plans. I was a displaced flâneuse, a bohemian observer at best, bobbing up in a context where help, not participation, was sorely needed. Why should I, and how could I explore the facets of walking together with someone with such a different set of life experiences, expectations, desires, intentions and beliefs? Sure, I thought myself to have come with the “right” kind of intentions: to work out an insightful way to show how the systemic violence of apartheid still affects the everyday life of Black people in South Africa today. To check and write about the vestiges of constitutional racial segregation that have survived, in habits and dispositions, a quarter century of democracy and to raise awareness, offer interpretation that can be used for other social settings, and make a case for why bodily ethnography matters. But the context of a lifeworld dominated by the devastating effects of the dehumanizing system that is apartheid seemed impenetrable for my white, privileged ethnographic self. During the following two and a half months I felt like I was observing and theorizing more than practicing what I came to do. While I had

numerous insightful conversations with local philosophers and students, and certainly did a lot of aimless ambling à la “Kierkegaard gone abroad”, I seemed to be walking away from what I set out to do. Would my work ever be driven by stories, or forever stuck in theory? On the day of my departure, I admitted to myself: I had now talked the talk, but still not walked the walk.

Back in my Swiss hometown Basel, I nearly got hit by a car three times within one week upon my return. I also was late for several appointments—which I *never* am—and had difficulty navigating my way through crowds. All of this was self-inflicted. Something had changed, but at the time I did not notice any of it as relevant because I was back home and did not think there was something to notice *in me*. My fieldwork diary was soon buried under books I thought easier to follow than my own scribblings. Why not spend a month on Charles Taylor’s interpretation of what Hegel would think about modern society? And then, perhaps, another month on Martha Nussbaum’s translation of Aristotle’s thoughts on animal locomotion? My next fieldwork period appeared on the horizon, and as I started stacking books I wanted to bring, I retrieved the unimposing notebook that was only one quarter filled with wish-wash I decided was worthless. The last entry, 04/30/2017, reads *next time*, accompanied by something between a question and an exclamation mark.

I have given you this somewhat messy introduction to my first discoveries, encounters and intertwined challenges that lay ahead of me to portray the interdependence of different themes relevant for my research in Makhanda, each shining through at one point, becoming more dominant or hiding behind layers of other things. The field does not naturally lend itself to analytic segregation of topics, but can be spun into a narrative only once the researcher has decided what to focus on. I was very much out of focus, overwhelmed by trying the impossible: to take in *everything*. But as Bernhard Waldenfels reminds us in his phenomenology of attention (2004): To see everything would mean to see nothing. This means, by implication, that focusing on some things necessarily includes a withdrawal of attention from others—I would have to learn to rechannel my attention. But rather than following Waldenfels’ aesthetic plead for a *suspension* of presumptions (2005, especially 226-286), I would need to find a way to become aware of these presumptions and learn how to relate to them in the new environment.

In the following, I will take a stab at unraveling specific difficulties that emerged during my research time by organizing chunks of my experience “on the ground” in a thematic order. The first part (4.5.1) is a literary walking tour through town. Each following subsection then treats a different issue that emerged out of the specific context in which I tried, and often failed, to participate in the course of my initial research period. Some of those issues have already made a first theoretical appearance and will now be interweaved in the crossover messiness of daily life that at times seems to actively resist thickening up to an easy-to-follow story line. Others are new arrivals. The topics are safety and security

(2), slowdown and waiting (3), unemployment and poverty (4), space (5) and lack of like-mindedness (6).

4.5.1 (Not) knowing where to look

I am back, four months later, trying to pen down what I SEE.

08/28/2017

Makhanda lies in a natural bowl. Within a short distance, it offers a well-visible steep incline between the city center and the township: Looking up, I can see the tin shacks on the eastern hillside while downing an espresso in front of a High Street Café in the valley of the city center, and I can arrive there on foot before the caffeine effect has worn off. Today, however, I have a walking date at the other side of town.

Zinzi and I are standing on the edges of a low-lying hill close to my temporary home, a former tuberculosis hospital that was turned into a self-catering guesthouse. The clock is about to strike 9 in the morning, and we are passed by several Black household workers and gardeners slowly walking further up the hill. They will pass the day running the kitchens, grooming and generously watering both indigenous and invasive species of plants in this water sacred area in the backyards of their white employers. Sunnyside, which is what this side of town is called, is a white neighborhood. Overlooking the valley, the hill provides us with a view of the other end of town, and nearly everything in between: To the West we see Rhodes University, a few pubs, cafés and restaurants, private schools, a shopping mall, a high court, some Victorian-style offices, and a Gothic cathedral dominating the skyline, all collected under a monument to the 1820 English settlers in the form of a massive, modernist concrete building breaking into the hillside. To the East we see an expansive township comprising more than 10 different extensions, referred to by its inhabitants simply as “the location”. Zinzi and her family live in Eluxoweni, just underneath the biggest part of the township; Joza. Here we find butcheries, shebeens¹¹⁰, government schools, community halls and dilapidated buildings.

Zinzi and I have left the hill on Sunnyside, and are now strolling down Bathurst street in the shadow of the huge, neo-gothic cathedral. Many of my research partners referred to this street as the “twilight zone” and indeed, sauntering down Bathurst Street I see one world fading away and another emerging. The socio-economic divide broadens as

¹¹⁰ During apartheid, Black Africans were barred from entering bars and restaurants as customers, and shebeens became the alternative for social and political gatherings. Shebeens were illicit bars selling alcoholic beverages without a license. In South Africa, they are mostly located in townships. They were often operated by women—commonly referred to as ‘shebeen queens’—harking back to the African tradition that assigned the role of alcohol brewing to women. Today, most shebeens are fully licensed. The word derives from the Irish *sibín*, meaning ‘illicit whiskey’.

we are crossing Beaufort street with its informal hair salons and supply stores, then passing furniture stores and historical Observatory Museum. White faces and well-maintained family cars wane, making room for bashed-up *iteksi* transporting Black faces to service and industry jobs.¹¹¹ Here, Makhanda's infamous potholes aspire to door-sized interruptions in the road. Zinzi, pointing at an *iteksi*, puts it this way: *They used to drive on the left side of the street. They now drive on whatever side of the street is left.*

We see litter windblown into pavement cracks, caked onto roadsides, seemingly stuck forever. Now walking uphill, from Bathurst street eastwards, towards the dusty streets of Joza, the roads become more and more uneven due to erosion. They also become increasingly populated with stray animals, and potholes grow to the size—and at one point the depth—of closets. Dr Jacob Zuma Drive, which leads up to the township, has a paved pedestrian walkway, so the main obstacles to be faced are stray cows and donkeys, which only reluctantly move out the way. We take a right turn down a muddy side road in the direction of Fingo Village, the oldest township settlement in Makhanda. This side street descends steeply down a hillside. Water, sewage, animals and vehicles have taken their toll on the surface of the road. Once down the slope, the condition of the road improves slightly. We are almost at Zinzi's place. I can already spot her partner and cousin chopping wood together in front of their outdoor fireplace. She invited me to a braai, which here means grilled pork and beer. I hear a group of women singing in front of a nearby church: *Sikhulule-kile*—we are free.

The first time I met Zinzi was in my office at the Rhodes philosophy department. During my first research period I was assigned a room to work which was pleasantly located right at Prince Alfred Road, the main access lane from the city into campus. Zinzi came by in her capacity as a fruit seller. My door stood open, I was glaring out the window, brooding because once more someone had—in my view—stood me up. Were my expectations with regard to what a meeting is so different? Were they wrong? If a meeting is confirmed from all parties to happen at time x in place y , how far astray from x and y is still acceptable as belonging to the realm of what was originally agreed upon as x and y ? What would Gilbert say? Is this like the misunderstanding Ntando and Susan had when they went walking together? A lack of conceptual convergence? Vuyokazi and I had agreed in the morning to meet the same day at 10 by the Arch. Frequently checking my Japanese Casio with a Swiss tilt towards timeliness, I waited for 59 minutes underneath a Jacaranda tree. Then, I returned to my office to fret and re-read Schmid's introduction to his habilitation—which begins with an Anna and a Berta negotiating their social intertwinement as they cross paths

¹¹¹ *Iteksi* are white Toyota vans that function as shuttle taxis between township and center. Each ride, no matter where one hops on or off, is 10 Rand, which is about 0,6 Swiss Francs. Although *iteksi* also drive around town center, I have never noticed a white person boarding an *iteksi* in Makhanda besides myself.

on a hiking trail—all while pretending to adapt a cultural-relativist framework according to which I was in no position to be upset.

Anyway, Zinzi entered my office without introduction and sat down at the empty chair next to the door. She was breathing heavily, complaining about the heat and the weight of her fruit basket. I was too surprised to ask who she was and what she wanted in my office. It was only my third week at the department, and I had no idea about Rhodes' policy for hawkers. Zinzi spoke English with me; her melodic accent and the fact that she was a Black fruit seller in the Eastern Cape made me assume that her first language was isiXhosa. I guessed her to be around my age. We exchanged complaints and fell into laughter after she established that I was upset about nothing. *It's a very white thing to complain about lost time. You are fine. And you will be fine.*

Hours later that day, I happened to run into Vuyokazi on the opposite side of town. She seemed pleased to see me and as we fell into walking together, it occurred to me that to her, we might be doing exactly what we had agreed upon. We chatted about the protest going on in front of city hall, which she found ridiculous. Apparently, some people really did not like the municipality's decision to rename the city. To them, it seemed like an invention of a past very different than the one that is so manifest in their present. I realized that had I not come here, it would have been my conviction that Black people would opt for the name change unanimously. But then, what did I know? *Guess who's in town? Vuyokazi seemed excited. This guy who played in a Fellini movie!*

4.5.2 Safety and security

One of the immediate issues I encountered centered around security. I was frequently scolded by white acquaintances for being irresponsible, naïve and careless for hanging out in the township “alone”—by which they meant without white company. Meanwhile, Black children and adults alike openly stared, pointed, even took photos of me in the township and generally thought it odd but hilarious to see a white person voluntarily spending time in “their” part of town. The most frequent reaction was friendly teasing and ridicule: *Mlungu!*¹¹² *What is your business here? Don't you know we will rob and murder you?* some of the cheekier youths would ask. Playing on racialized, stereotypical images on both sides—the Black predator and the fearful white—their jokes were reminders of the rare presence of whites in township other than the occasional charity worker, and also of a brutal reality: killings instigated by petty crime were not that exceptional, and I could have been

¹¹² A Zulu word, Mlungu (alternatively Mzungu) is also used in the Eastern Cape—the native homeland of the amaXhosa—to designate a white person, a person of European descent or a person of means. The word is used in affectionate or insulting ways, and I have experienced both. Some say it refers to the white foam that collects along the shore of the beach, but I have also witnessed its use for people who roam and wander around—a foreign traveler or explorer.

an easy target for a quick “stab-and-collect”. Precise numbers are under disclosure, but the local newspaper, the Grocott’s Mail, reports on theft-related murder in the area on a weekly basis.¹¹³

I developed a habit of joining in the teasing: *Joke’s on you, I’m having a splendid time*. My mocking of the over-pronounced, oh-so British *splendid* was usually well-received. I was white, but my accent was not South African. I did not belong to the colonized, but was not the colonizer either.¹¹⁴ I was unequivocally told I was too small for an Afrikaner, too fat to be English, but the typical amount of restless for a mlungu. Comforted to learn that at least some aspects of what I wanted to understand were neatly put into the form of propositions, I embraced my position as a white non-national. Just foreign enough to appear exotic, my main asset was that questions about the other’s lifeworld could be posed from both sides. As the word spread that I was from Switzerland, I would regularly answer questions about the melting quality of snow and my love for hiking—for why else did I not drive a car? Overall, my position seemed to be somewhere in between known and foreign other, and my interest in walking together taken as an oddity connected to my heritage: The Swiss don’t mind walking in the cold—it’s their thing. Of course, I was always open about my intentions and would introduce myself as a researcher interested in modes of walking together. But, admittedly to my surprise, I was rarely asked follow-up questions about my intent. Most people, after a second look at the mlungu, simply did not care about my presence, and even those I ended up seeing regularly showed little interest in my reasons for being there and hanging out with them.

Whether or not people go for walks in Makhanda largely depends on their feeling of security. Walking together, as my research partners see it, is first and foremost a means to feel safer than walking alone. Muggings and petty crime happen on a daily basis, in broad daylight and not only in empty alleys, but in front of busy supermarkets and on campus. The most reported scenario is that a Black person mugs a white person in public space. Black people have experience with theft-related violence by other Blacks while walking, too, but I was told that many refrain from reporting it. My research partners assumed it to be common knowledge that walking together was a form of being there for each other, and

¹¹³ While some of those killings were connected to home invasion and rape, most appeared to happen for material goods.

¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, white South Africans often displayed a defensive reflex towards me, at times complaining about their supposedly bad international image, and seemingly feeling misunderstood by “the European press”. There would be much to say about the difference between Afrikaner and English white South Africans. For a gripping ethnographic interpretation of each, see Vincent Crapanzano’s *Waiting. The Whites of South Africa* (1986). Achille Mbembe described white South Africans during and after apartheid as mental expats. In his *Sortir de la grande nuit—Essai sur l’Afrique décolonisée* (2010), he vividly describes how both English South Africans and Afrikaners like to talk about living in South Africa only for a short while, while allegedly *actually* belonging somewhere else, dreaming of a “return” to a Europe they have never seen: “Beaucoup de Blancs ne savaient plus où ils avaient été durant toutes ces années obscènes. Tout se passait comme s’ils venaient de sortir tout droit de l’asile. D’autres ne voulaient rien savoir. Pas même le nom du pays qu’ils habitaient et dont, théoriquement, ils étaient à présent les citoyens. Expatriés mentaux, ils ne cessaient de se raconter des histoires. Bien que vivant ici, ils appartenaient en vérité à un ‘ailleurs’, l’Europe, qu’ils s’étaient efforcés de reproduire ici, presque à l’identique, comme autrefois les colons anglais sur les bords du Potomac” (2010: 46-47).

that leaving in the midst of it was a sign of lack of care for the other, or an expression of the assumption that there was no danger in sight.

Skin color is visible even from a distant view, which invites to preselect and pick one's way through town accordingly. One evening I was rushing up the main road at nightfall. It had just started raining and I was wearing a hoodie, with the hood up over my head. The streetlights were off because of another load shedding.¹¹⁵ A young white man with a small backpack was walking in front of me. Hearing my steps approaching, he briefly turned around, started speeding up and fumbling in his pockets. Worried that it might be pepper spray he was reaching for, I shouted a high-pitched "good evening" and pulled down my hood. As he turned around, his expression shifted from distress to relief. He sheepishly greeted me back and as I passed him, it was common knowledge between us what just happened.

4.5.3 Slowdown and waiting for the state

One of my first observations on bodily movements was that everything was slowed down; and that Black people especially walked much slower than I was used to. As the point of reference for this statement is my normal walking pace, a remark on this benchmark—me—is in order. Before beginning my field studies, I have lived my walking life in Switzerland and nearby European countries. I consider myself a sturdy, but not overeager walker. According to the most recent report for the German Federal Road Research Institute the walking pace in Switzerland, depending on age and topography, is between 0,7 and 1,5 m/s (Alrutz et al. 2012: 18). My average walking speed, measured with my mobile phone over 2 weeks in Basel, is 1,2m/s, which is roughly 4,3 km/h, which puts me just on the faster side of average, for a Swiss person. The average speed I measured when walking with my research partners was 0,8m/s, which is about 2,9km/h. *Why [are] you always so busy? or Switzerland in a rush again!* I would hear my research partners' mocking many times. To them, there was rarely something to be in a rush for.

Waiting in shacks of informal settlement, passing years, even decades, in overcrowded homes, "temporarily" maintaining a makeshift household, seemingly forever registered on a housing waiting list, seemingly forever a ward of the state: this is what life is like for my Makhandian research partners.

In "Waiting for the State: A Politics of Housing in South Africa" (2015), Sophie Oldfield and Saskia Greyling reflect on the micropolitics of waiting. They argue that waiting for homes in post-apartheid South Africa shapes local politics in the precarious spaces of

¹¹⁵ The specific reasons for why there is no electricity at some times of the day remain opaque and are hotly debated within the Makhandian community. One point of discussion is that the municipality does not seem to be able to pay its electricity bills to the national utility ESKOM, which has threatened to cut the city off power. Another reason for load shedding is the insufficient production of power for the growing city.

informality and illegality that constitute South African cities.¹¹⁶ While this is certainly true for Makhanda, what also needs mention is the growing distrust towards the often opaque practices of the national government, and a growing sense that the right to vote does not change much. Waiting has turned many township dwellers away from politics. The generation of the born-free were vowed opportunity, but given little more than more promises. Over time, waiting has become a basic mode of dwelling. Oldfield and Greyling observe that for the majority of Black South African citizens, the “right to access housing translates in practice to the experience of waiting” and that in this way, “waiting for the state is both normalised and legitimate” (2015: 1101). They reference Oren Yiftachel, who aptly labels these states of waiting “permanent temporariness” (2009), and Craig Jeffrey, according to whom they represent modalities of “being in the middle” (2010: 97). Javier Auyero, who also finds mention in their article, characterizes this type of waiting as “uncertainty and arbitrariness [...] dominated by persistent confusion and misunderstanding” (2012: 72). The study concludes that across South African cities, waiting for state-provided, formal homes has become normal, “a taken-for-granted, everyday, intergenerational condition” (2015: 1100). This was true for every township dweller I talked with, but it struck me time and again that waiting was not restricted to the domain of housing. It seemed pervasive in all segments of Black South African life.

As noted, my research partners belong to the generation growing up just after apartheid ended and resemble the generation Mandela hoped to be unbound from repression, having ahead of them a prosperous future. They came of age in a time of hope and promises that were not fulfilled, but postponed at best. Born into a context where institutional voices kept making pledges for immediate and efficient improvement, which did not arrive, they now have the right to vote, but in their lifetime have experienced little positive impact. To most Black South Africans living in Makhanda today, essential features of their lives remain the same—socially, spatially and economically. This stasis can foster stagnation and indifference, and it did in some women I spent time with. The way they explained it to me, there are no jobs and no opportunities, so there is also no external reason to do anything. Their indifference resulted in a lack of care for themselves and others, which showed in the way they carried themselves, their bodily demeanor and the lack of engagement with their environment. Importantly, this lack of engagement was a direct result of an excruciating life in poverty and existential threats of life on a daily basis. I need to stress that many of these women were regularly scrambling for food and a safe place to simply sit. They were tired, some of them tired enough to not care much about themselves. This would show in moments when it started raining or in traffic. Those who

¹¹⁶ To qualify for housing, as Oldfield and Greyling write, South African citizens must meet certain income and age criteria, “and not have accessed state assistance for homeownership at any stage in the past” (2015: 1100n1). See this paper for a detailed discussion of the administrative hurdles, processes and conditions of qualification for housing.

cared adjusted their speed according to the situation, those who did not kept to their pace regardless if they were getting soaked or almost hit by a car. At times, this appeared to me as a form of self-alienation, which in turn impeded the formation of desires, intentions, and bonds.¹¹⁷ This fit with my observation that those who seemingly did not care rarely walked with others. Why would they? Security did not seem to be a good to maintain, as they felt that they had nothing to lose. Bonds were harder to obtain as the widespread daily struggle for food left many with the credo that one can trust no-one. One woman told me that it was impossible to her to entertain friendships after having been stabbed and robbed by her cousin twice. Her trust in humanity, as she put it, was gone. Some, when asked about their intention to slowly step into the midst of a dissolving traffic jam, referred to higher powers—*God*—as the only entity left to decide about their fate. Government inaction had sedimented into the bodily movements decelerating those who were forced to wait in permanent temporariness. Many of those women, when I asked about the upcoming national presidential election, made it clear that they will not go and vote. *The government? I am done waiting. I am waiting for Him to reveal His plan for me, that is all.*

4.5.4 Unemployment and economic inequality

South Africa remains the most economically unequal country in the world (World Bank 2018: 42-60). One obvious way in which this uneven distribution of wealth and opportunity shows is in where people live.

As mentioned, infrastructure is in a state of permanent disrepair, which increases commute walks for those without cars. Makhanda is a water scarce area, but the main cause of water-shortage is rusty pipes. The vast neglect of the municipal water system has created a health and sanitation crisis. Untreated sewage runs freely in many parts of town and the supply of drinking water has nearly collapsed (Nowicki 2018, McKaiser 2020). During my research periods, some of which fell into the rainy season, the town encountered periods of up to 6 days without water coming out of taps.¹¹⁸ This affected the life of everyone, but especially those living uphill—the whole township—for water pressure was first insufficient to reach the higher areas. Also, those without access to motorized vehicles or the means to buy a rain tank are hit hard. Getting water, either from a spring or in a store, means walking far, with a heavy load. I would see Black people commuting on foot with canisters of up to 60 liter balanced on their heads. No electricity means no functioning water pumps at the

¹¹⁷ For an illuminating account on different modes of self-alienation, see Rahel Jaeggi's *Alienation* (2016), especially chapter 7 on self-alienation as internal division (99-130) and chapter 9, where alienation is considered from the perspective of the subject as deficient relation to and an impeded appropriation of world and self (151-198).

¹¹⁸ The municipality is supposed to organize load shedding, which is supposed to fairly distribute water and electricity into different parts of town at a time. Depending on the living area, however, one had to encounter more or less, longer or shorter dry periods. When water pressure was low, people living higher up were more likely to have no water unless they could afford to install rain tanks.

reservoirs, which worsens the water problem. It also means closed shops and restaurants, no internet, no light, uncharged phones and out of action stove tops. It means more fires being lit for cooking, and more people walking to fetch wood and bottled water, and to keep warm. In general, people are on the move more during times of water and electricity load shedding to cover their basic needs. Walking, in this context, becomes a sign of being in need of something, and walking together a sign of collective effort.

Poverty and unemployment amongst the Black population do not only affect the material, existential realm of individuals, but also social cohesion, interpersonal relationships and bodily movements.

I found striking similarities between Black Makhandians' behavior and the findings of a study I remembered from a sociology class during my undergrad. The first systematical in-depth study of the effects of unemployment, *Die Arbeitslosen von Marienthal* (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel 1975), examined the sociography of an unemployed community, and found alterations in behavior and attitudes. Today considered a major classic in the literature of social stratification, this psychosocial, multimethodological study explored the impact of job loss and long-term unemployment for a town community of approximately 800 people in 1930 Austria. A whole community lost their jobs at the same time as a large textile factory in the village of Marienthal, south east of Vienna, was shut down during a depression. The main study thesis was that continuing unemployment leads to a state of apathy in which the unemployed cease to make use of even the little opportunity they have left.

To measure alterations, researchers in Marienthal stood in the village high street with stopwatches and compared walking tempi from both male and female adults before and after they got fired. The numbers revealed that unemployed men walked significantly slower compared to when they had work. They also were late for appointments more often than before. Females, too, walked slower than when they were employed, but approximately 1,5 times faster than the men. The researchers explained this with the fact that women still had meaningful chores and everyday tasks to complete during the day, and thus felt the need to amble in order to pass time to a lesser degree. The collected data was interpreted to uncover a vicious cycle between reduced opportunities and reduced aspiration. Free time came to be considered a burden for those without occupation. "Going out" for most women was still connected to work since they were running errands, while for men, who did not do household work, it was about killing time. Overall, the study showed that unemployment does not typically lead to revolts and radicalization—as was previously thought—but more commonly to apathy and resignation (1975: 32-54).

It struck me as likely that I would get similar results in Makhanda, and since my planned qualitative research seemed to be going nowhere, I sought refuge in a little quantitative survey on walking pace myself. Of course, the implications and effects cannot

seamlessly be transferred to my case. In general, the study in Marienthal is so unique because its social setting had unusually clear-cut borders: a whole town was hit by the same impact at the same time, migration was absent; everyone stayed where they were. It was a rare, ideal setting for a social experiment. We find similar types of studies in the anthropology of Malinowski's time, when researchers still thought to find "secluded tribes", untouched by anything outside of their communal lifeworld. For one thing, unemployment did not hit my research partners suddenly. Most of them, the "born free", never had a steady occupation. My cases were more complex. Importantly, there seldom is career opportunity. Many jobs open to the degreeless portion of the "born free" generation do not offer opportunity for advancement, further training or promotion. At the same time, the country's post-apartheid labor laws require that in order to fire someone, the employer has to prove that the dismissal was both procedurally and substantively fair. Fair reasons for dismissal are serious misconduct. Merely working slow or inobservantly, not responding to customers or answering customers' requests consistently with "No" or "I don't know" is not considered serious misconduct unless proven to be damaging for the business. The stagnation is thus twofold: One cannot rise, and one cannot be dismissed. Stagnation expresses itself not only amongst the jobless, but also among those stuck working at check outs, the local gas station or the pub kitchen.

I stopped time anyway, with my smart phone. From the Arch to the iteksi stop, from Bathurst Street to Zinzi's house, from home to campus, alone, with Black or white company. Over a period of 9 months, I compared walking times of Black unemployed persons and employees, between Black and white South Africans of the same age group, both employed and unemployed. My numbers showed a general speed difference between Black and white South Africans: In average, whites, both employed and unemployed, walked 1,8 times faster. There was no significant difference between employed and unemployed whites, and a small difference of 0,4 between unemployed and employed "born frees". I also noticed that as time went by, I was walking more and more slowly regardless of whether I had company or was walking alone. The flâneuse had tempered her gait. I slowly began to not only see, but habitually adjust to the pace of the city. While it would be too strong to claim that I myself could, through walking, *feel* how unemployment and economic inequality in Makhanda had impacted the bodily dimension of its inhabitants, my own slowing down helped to enter the perceptual field of those whose pace, to me, seemed directly impacted by government inaction.

4.5.5 Reproduction of spatial segregation

Until today, Makhanda's history is marked by the racialized contestation and control of space. Paddy O'Halloran, who has done extensive ethnographic work in Makhanda, uses

Henri Lefebvre's insights on space to shed light on the specific power relations at work when public space is (re)negotiated in post-apartheid South Africa. His writing recalls Lefebvre's notion of "production of space", arguing that social space is a social product with "a sort of reality of its own" (Lefebvre 1991: 26). I take this to mean that only from within a community collectively producing, through everyday practice, the social space it inhabits can one understand its inherent logic and tacit agreements that make up this Lefebvrian reality of its own.

Depending on the hierarchical structure of a community, the production of space is more or less evenly distributed. The category 'space', as people walk the streets of Makhanda, serves as "a tool of thought and of action; [...] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (ibid., here quoted in O'Halloran 2018: 1-2). Spatial segregation is incorporated in the bodily practices of Makhanda's inhabitants. Black township dwellers are reluctant to walk in certain areas of town for fear of being discriminated as not belonging, for trespassing or for meaning mischief. For instance, when approaching a shop, Zinzi would stop in front of it and take time to make eye contact with the (usually also Black) security. Unlike any white person I have ever seen entering a shop in Makhanda, Zinzi would have to leave her bag at the entrance door floor. Also, when approaching the public road where most department buildings of Rhodes University are situated, many township dwellers would halt because, as they say, they will be sent away by the University's private security since they do not look like students and "have no business roaming around near University premises", as a security man explained to me.¹¹⁹ Zinzi has successfully stood up against this, repeatedly reminding security guards that she is walking on public ground, and selling her fruit to academic staff sitting in their offices on the main road. Reclaiming public space, her walk is firm and slow, she never gives way to a white person. When someone on the narrow walkway approaches, she would slow down, keep straight, at times stop and stand her ground until the white person has circumvented her by stepping onto the street. As my own awareness of the local production of space increased, I began to suspect that walking slowly might be something more, or something different, than an expression of apathy.

4.5.6 Lack of like-mindedness

As my second research period was coming to an end, I certainly still felt far away from my research partners in the sense that I rarely thought I knew what was going on. My body kind of "told me so" as my gait was getting increasingly insecure as we started walking, as

¹¹⁹ By 2020, more than half of all students enrolled at Rhodes are Black. Nevertheless, security have raised awareness to differentiate between Black students and not-students. As I am told, for instance, the wearing of backpacks can be an indicator, but also the way a Black person's hair is done or the clothes they wear.

if I was always prepared to be left on the spot. Was I speeding up too much? If interpersonal coordination enhances pro-social attitudes, creates commitment, I was in a hopeless position. I felt like a lousy dancer and was reminded of the time when I took up playing the drums for a couple of months. I was never any good, always too fast. The difference to my literal missteps was that my musical derailment was audible (when the other instruments could compete with my volume), while my walking too fast might have just been silently noted as annoying. My research partners would show up, or not, be engaged in one moment and then disengaged in the next, or commit to walk to the center and turn around half-way. Was I bad company? Some stories would be told, personal stuff and courtesies. Laughs would be had, and secrets exchanged. Yet it still felt pre-mature to assume that I took part in a shared intentional action. What seemed missing was something more than the recognition that in one moment in time we think alike and intend the same, but that we are, so to say, like-minded in the sense that we share more than the conceptual convergence of what it is to walk together and the intention to do so, but a way of perceiving and understanding the world. I felt a deep sense of unreliability, and although I knew that this had more to do with my own socialization and bodily habitus, and although I knew that pretty much everything is more important than going for a walk with me, I felt like I had failed to do my bit.

For the longest time, I remained in the role of an observer, tagging along. I noticed, for instance that when confronted with an obstacle—alive or dead, moving or still—my walking partners would either slow down or stop completely (like Zinzi on campus) as if they halted to carefully consider how to go about the situation. Black locals would also not disperse a walking crowd or break up their own group in order to pass an obstacle. What is more, they adapt to the pace of the slowest member, never leaving them behind. Perhaps I needed to work on my patience, compassion and perhaps resilience. Something drastic seemed to have already happened to my standards: I found myself unmoved by rather shocking collocations of wealth and poverty. Was this progress?

My third research period was coming to an end and I still felt that I had made no headway. I had built quite a bit of contextual knowledge of the everyday, would feel more home than “in the field”, but I still had not participated in anything, really.

4.6 Conclusion

In this first empirical chapter, I have historicized contemporary modes of walking in Makhanda, arguing that spatial exclusion and economical discrimination of the past—which are among the political precursors of contemporary modes of exclusion—have sedimented in the bodily practice of walking in the Black population of Makhanda.

My theoretical knowledge of historical facts about South Africa was a useful beginning in the sense that it sometimes helped me see where to look. It offered a first toehold which allowed me to observe what might be relevant in the lives of my walking companions. But my walks, even when beside another person, were the walks of a passive audience more than of an active attendee. In that sense, this chapter was about failing to participate and remaining in the role of the observer.

Rupture and failure can be part of revelation. The anthropologist is a confounder, intentionally or not, and in virtue of being this might highlight, through the irritation of her presence, aspects of social life that would otherwise remain tacit. One way to contest specific conceptual framings of participation and the formation of shared, bodily knowledge is to investigate cases of failure: Whenever things go wrong—our walking companion rushes away solo, or does not share our admiration of a landscape—we become self-conscious about our assumptions of certain shared intentions. We might rethink our presumptions and conclude that what we thought was a shared perspective was in fact something else. This is crucial for anthropologists whose basic methodological assumption is that understanding parts of other people's perspective of the world is possible in spite of different stocks of knowledge and different perception dispositions.

At the same time, realizing the occurrence of a misunderstanding can be revealing with regards to the shared action as well. What happens at the point of breakdown? Is there a way of understanding the conception and the production of collective intentionality through analyzing occurrences of failure? Can sedimented bodily knowledge actually *prevent* certain forms of sociality and shared intentionality? And, if so, in what ways are we separated by the bodily knowledge we hold?

Only after an unexpected and decisive challenge to my flâneusehood occurred did answers to these questions begin to emerge: I broke my foot.

Chapter 5

Fruits of Participation

In so far as it makes *sense* to say that my pain is the same as his, it is also possible for us both to have the same pain.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, PI §253

5.1 Introduction

As the South African spring of 2019 approached, scribbles in my field diary were getting more and more desperate. I had spent a total of 9 months in Makhanda and felt like I had made no progress. Things I thought I understood turned out to be incorrect or more complicated than they appeared; or else they presented themselves as things I could have understood by thinking hard and reading *at home*. I had produced piles of files on random encounters, reams of quotes from people walking next to me, and various interpretations for the same situations—none of which I felt comfortable with. My fieldnotes were riddled with question marks and “BUTs”. Uncertainty had not decreased, but taken over.

And then I broke my foot.

It happened shortly before my final research period. The swelling and pain began just after I had returned from a month in Princeton, where I had taken up running—on top of walking to campus every day. It had been winter whilst I was there, with temperatures below -15°C , and I must not have felt the bones slowly cracking. I had contracted what the orthopedist called a double march fracture. *Like soldiers*. The diagnosis was wear and tear damage. The cause: too much running around without paying attention. *What do you do for a living? Can you work like this?* The irony was not lost on Dr. Payer. I would have to wear a cast on my foot for four months. Not to be theatrical, but due to a language error (or was it a Freudian slip?), I called it my casket. *Off I go. One foot in the casket!*

With a loose bundle of low expectations, I returned to Makhanda for what I anticipated would be three fruitless months of attentive hobbling. Little did I know, my debilitating injury would turn out to be the best thing that could possibly have happened for my fieldwork.

Non-propositional knowledge of the lifeworld of others cannot be attained without long-term participation in bodily co-presence. The interpretation of my fieldwork in this chapter reveals an interesting perspective on why this is true. Building on my uncertainties and doubts showcased in the previous chapter, I argue that sharing in a small-scale, everyday action like walking together only became possible through the emergence of interpersonal trust; and that this trust in turn developed through my visible and invisible vulnerability, allowing me a point of commonality with my research partners. Trust as a necessary ingredient for a shared action to emerge is in itself a rather uncontroversial anthropological claim. My point, however, is that the initial failure to interpersonally connect is itself a source of understanding. Repeatedly trying, and failing, to participate fostered not only the formation of bonds of trust with time, effort, and unassuming learning; it also highlighted the gaps between what is understood and what is not. By calling attention to this difference, I will argue in this final chapter, Participant Observation allows for insights into the lifeworld of others that other research methods cannot offer.

I believe that my individual experience in this case contains broader lessons concerning what is required for successful participation. That is because my experience reveals something about how non-propositional knowledge and intentions can be shared despite vastly different cultural, historical and individual backgrounds. I will argue that shared intentions come into being through the mutual recognition of points of commonality I will describe in detail below, which in turn establish trust. Only if *interpersonal* trust is built, I will insist, can *intercultural* distrust be overcome and collective intentionality between people from segregated cultures emerge.¹²⁰

At the beginning of this book, I outlined a central set of questions about Participant Observation. How does the knowledge gained by participation surpass, underpin, or at least complement knowledge gained in the armchair? What is it exactly that we gain by joining in a practice? As I have laid out theoretically, answers to these questions have to be grounded in practice. This is to say that at least some of my findings must turn out to be fruits of participation, and only by extension products of contemplation. It was unforeseeable how a broken foot would alter my relationship with my research partners, yet once I paid attention to the social metamorphosis that took place within and around me, I was able to rework, inductively, my train of thoughts from the particular to the general. This final chapter will reveal how bodily participation under seemingly aggravating conditions lead to conclusions I would not have found otherwise. Accordingly, knowledge gained by participation does not simply complement knowledge from the armchair, but actively reshapes and transforms it. Rather than completing a nearly finished picture, bodily knowledge through participation lets us reassess, revise and throw out presumptions

¹²⁰ Likewise, *interpersonal* trust can help to overcome boundaries between, for instance, classes and generations.

based on armchair knowledge that represented our previous understanding of a given thematic constellation. Indeed, I will argue that some of my general claims about the everyday life of Black people in South Africa would have been converse to what they turned out to be. Questions I have so far considered purely from a theoretical perspective will, in this final chapter, be treated in the immediacy and particularity of my case study.

The plan for this final chapter is as follows. I begin (in section 5.2) by considering the question of whether it is possible for distinct subjects to know each other's pain. I then consider (in 5.3) the importance of authenticity and trust for shared action and the meaning of slowing down as a form of resistance against white dominance (in 5.4). The aggregate of these empirical findings will supply the foundation for a set of theoretical implications for participation (in 5.5) and final ramifications on a critical conceptual framework of participation (5.6).

5.2 Points of commonality: sharing pain

With my broken foot, commuting to campus now took three times as long as it had done. The cast forced me to pick my way more carefully. Some busy intersections which before I used to swiftly cross between speeding cars now appeared untraversable. Walkways were laced with tree roots and potholes filled with rainwater or sewage: where I used to jump over, I now had to circumvent. Last but not least, my immobility made me a passive receiver of company rather than an active instigator on the social passing lane. I used to observe others taking their time while overtaking them—unless I was myself committed to walking with someone. Now I was hobbling in the midst of the Black pedestrian population: car guards, commuting workers, beggars, the elderly, parents with toddlers and farmers with donkeys.

I felt like I could have easily been surpassed by anyone who did not downshift—but many did. Never have I had so much company while walking. My commutes to campus became longer not only because of physical restraints on my speed but also because I was now offered greetings, small chats and inquiries about the state of my foot. What struck me was how clear cut the group of people who most regularly waited and chatted was: it was Black women around my age and older, most of them, like me, on their way to work. Some of them had their own walking disabilities and were eager to exchange tales of woe. Our ordeals had vastly different sources. I had broken my foot walking too much by choice. Their stories were of domestic violence, early child abuse, freak accidents and late treatments of infections. Their walking disabilities came from injuries and chronic diseases

like type 2 diabetes¹²¹, but also from untreated joint malalignment. Last but not least, many of them, disabled and healthy, were simply exhausted from the daily miles of walking from job to job and running errands. I myself would have never dared to compare, let alone equate my pain with theirs. But I was treated by them like a fellow sufferer. Whilst I was sporting the Rolls Royce of casts, with adjustable air cushions, some of them were wearing dirty bandages and ill-sized slippers—yet not one woman mentioned this discrepancy between us. Most commonly, they would point or nod at the cast, shake their head, express commiseration, and then either relate to the pain or change topic, all while adjusting to my pace.

At first, I could not understand what induced so many of them into walking with me, some regularly, in the morning on their way to work. When I asked one woman—herself on the way to clean the rooms of the philosophy department—what made her approach me, she pointed out that it was unusual to see a white woman in a cast walking. *You white people don't walk even if you're fine. Always in your cars.* It was true: white Makhandians normally owned motorized vehicles, and used them for small errands, going out and getting to work. Driving was conceived as more convenient, safer and faster than walking; three values considerably less accessible to South Africa's Black population.¹²² To them, my walking, even more so with impaired abilities, was welcomed as an egalitarian act.

During that final spring, I was teaching a postgrad class on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and I was eager to learn from my students what they made of the passages on sharing pain. Wittgenstein raises the question of what counts as a criterion of identity:

I have seen a person in a discussion on this subject strike himself on the breast and say: "But surely another person can't have THIS pain!"—The answer to this is that one does not define a criterion of identity by emphatic stressing of the word "this". Rather, what the emphasis does is to suggest the case in which we are conversant with such a criterion of identity, but have to be reminded of it. (PI: §253)

He goes on to state in the subsequent paragraph:

¹²¹ In their study on the spreading of diabetes in South Africa, Pheiffer et al. note that several factors have contributed to the increased diabetes prevalence, such as the ageing population, but also, significantly, "urbanisation associated with nutrition transition and obesity [...]. In 2000, it was estimated that 87% of diabetes cases in South Africa were attributed to excess body weight" (Pheiffer et al. 2018: 1).

¹²² Drunk driving was a widespread phenomenon amongst my car-owning friends and commonly accepted as a necessary evil, somewhat cynically justified with safety: Better to drive home drunk than to walk and get mugged. Going out for drinks was often presented to me as leading to an unavoidable dilemma to which the only solution was to bite the bullet of driving drunk. In this way, too, the Black population was more vulnerable than the white, since most Black people had to walk everywhere, at times forced to cross highways and walk on badly lit streets.

The substitution of “identical” for “the same” (for example) is another typical expedient in philosophy. As if we were talking about shades of meaning, and all that were in question were to find words to hit on the correct nuance. (PI: §254)

Wittgenstein’s concern here is with language and the possibility of conceptual convergence. However, the paragraphs struck a nerve with my students with regard to their implications for ordinary language use in their everyday lives. Can we claim to know another person’s pain? Is it okay to relate, as a white person, to a Black person’s suffering? Is it even possible?

With the exception of one visiting student from Nigeria, my class consisted of young South Africans of all main national races. Everyone was tremendously sensitive and thoughtful towards the problem of whether one can claim to know another person’s pain. They remained skeptical and argued against any possibility of certainty regarding someone else’s feelings. A Black student suggested that in any relationship where there is a power asymmetry, there should also be an asymmetry of interpretational sovereignty in the opposite direction: *You know my pain when I say so.*

The student’s suggestion made me think more about my own reluctance to claim an understanding of my research partner’s feelings, intentions and lives in general. My slowness and visible disability seemed to have made me more relatable. It represented a point of commonality, not just with Black women who also suffered from walking disabilities, but with walking Black women in general. I realized that what it took for me to embrace this point of commonality was *their* invitation to do so. The connecting point was not so much about shared knowledge, but about *acknowledgement*—which, in this case, had to come from the side of the researched and not the researcher. My problem turned out to matter to the women—perhaps less because of what that problem was, than simply because I had one and showed it openly. *You could be mugged so easily like this, but you walk to work anyways.*

Unless I brought it up, none of the women stated the obvious: my walking appearance was unusual not because I was injured but because I was injured and white. When I pointed out that, statistically, almost everyone in Makhanda walks everywhere, injured or not, and that it was only the few percentages of people with car access—white people—who drove, most women made it clear that they assumed I had no other option, either. No one ever asked intrusive questions about my circumstances, but it surfaced time and again that to my walking companions I was another unfortunate person forced to walk. One woman, seemingly ignoring the fact that I was white, even spoke of white people with me in the third person plural: *Walking is not for them; it is for those who have to.* Racial affiliation was briefly switched for social affiliation that we, the two women walking to work together, now shared, and what separated us from the others, the whites. My new, “broken”

appearance fell outside of the domain of a 'mlungu' because one of its defining features, the privilege to privacy, was missing.

The acknowledgement I received from these women of our common circumstance was not a free pass to assume shared knowledge of pain. But it allowed, even if just for the duration of our walk, for a point of commonality between two individuals from otherwise still very segregated racial groups. Sharing pain, in this context, is not to be mixed up with claims about knowing the other's pain—let alone having an overall shared horizon of experience to draw from. Rather, it should be seen as an offer to connect, a way to relate to others and share points of commonality when crossing paths, and choosing to walk together for a bit. What I shared was not the pain of an injured pedestrian; but by walking like this, I shared into the reality of the everyday lives of these women, who walked daily, regardless of their wellbeing, the weather or other circumstances—and who acknowledged me as a companion in misfortune. The women's shaking their heads and offering commiseration I took as a sign of this acknowledgement. They indicated understanding of my circumstances, and ascribed to me the capacity to be conversant, once reminded, with a criterion of identity known to them and, by invitation, to *us*. In so far as we mutually recognize a sufficiently shared context—or, to conclude in Wittgensteinian terms, in so far as it makes *sense* to say that their pain is the same as mine—it is also possible for us both to have the same pain.

As my student's observation reminded me, however, this invitation was not without restrictions. In this context, the permission to claim the same pain had to come from the side of the researched and not of the researcher. It had to make *sense* to them. As these Black women were the experts of what I was eager to explore—their life circumstances—it was their call to strike a connection. Adapting this restriction to Wittgenstein's dictum: it makes sense to say that we share pain *when they tell me so*. One time, when I apologized for holding up a group of Black women walking behind me on a narrow path down Bathurst street, the youngest one said: *You walk the way you walk, there's nothing you can do about that*. My initial reaction, then, was silent disagreement. After all, I thought, I was here to learn different ways of walking. Also, I was only disabled temporarily. If I followed my doctor's orders, I would be back to speed in no time. Clearly, I concluded, there was in fact *much* I could do to change the way I walk. But this interpretation missed a more interesting point the woman might have alluded to: that instead of apologizing for something I could not change, I might accept my present circumstances and allow its impact on myself and others to serve as an authentic act.

5.3 Authenticity, and four more lessons from Zinzi

As I became conscious of the new perspective afforded by my disability, I suspected that I should reconsider my earlier fieldnotes; in particular my interpretations of what people said and did. I revisited my extensive list of failures and retrieved incomplete notes taken after a long evening of meat and beer in front of Zinzi's house. Notes are always incomplete in one way or another, but in this particular case mine were profoundly so. They consisted entirely of a single, sparse sentence: *went for walk with Z, ate with Z and family, was disengaged, people angry, Z noticed.*

Despite the sparseness of my written record, I remembered the evening vividly.¹²³ This was during my middle research period, in 2018. A conversation had abruptly gone serious with Zinzi. After a walk, we had been eating together with her partner, her son and her cousin in front of their shack and sharing a box of Redd's cider. As we chatted, people I did not know stopped by and pointed at me, speaking isiXhosa. Sometimes they addressed me, seemingly upset; sometimes they spoke directly to Zinzi, the woman of the house. I felt awkward and did not know what was going on, but when she asked if I was okay, I said something to the effect of, *Sure, everything's fine.* At this, she shook her head and looked annoyed.

You always say that everything's fine. You like this? She pointed all around herself: the shack, the puddles by the entrance area, the last firewood burning down, the angry neighbors leaving.

What do you want? To please people? I do not know you. You never speak your mind. She moved on to explain why people were upset. Apparently, they were bothered by my presence without leaving presents. They were angry at Zinzi for repeatedly inviting a white person, but not introducing them to me so they could also benefit from my wealth and connections. *You know what they think?*, she confided in me. *They think that I am keeping all the profits for myself. It's easier when we walk, that could mean anything, but here, everyone sees that you are my guest.*

She had shielded me all that time. I now recalled: Whenever we were walking or sitting together and someone would ask me for money or a job, or even just inquire if I knew someone who needed a gardener, a seamstress or a cook, she told them off. People rarely argued back against her radiating authority, but simply mumbled *Askies* (sorry) and left. But now, Zinzi had been burdened with a version of the "Black tax". One of my students had mentioned this to me in passing: "Black tax" denotes the moral obligation of the

¹²³ The technical term for using memory in ethnographic work is 'headnotes'. Calling attention to the authoritative status of written recollection, Hastrup writes that "[t]he almost mythological status of field notes as recorded observation has often obscured the pertinence of the highly emotionally loaded 'headnotes', the unwritten recollections. This has fostered a view of intentionality as located in a disembodied mind, and a view of agency as the outcome of cognitive rationality alone" (1995: 94).

youngest Black generation to support family and friends in financial distress. It leaves many young Black South Africans with the burden of paying school fees for siblings, helping with rent and groceries.¹²⁴ The version of the Black tax Zinzi was charged with was more subtle. She had “access” to a white person, a Rhodes lecturer even, but did not press her to share her wealth or offer jobs. This evening, as others, Zinzi had bought the meat and I had supplied drinks and snacks for 6 people. But as these upset neighbors pointed out, I could have easily afforded more.

The gaping hole between our worlds that we had been trying to bridge by just doing everyday things had never truly disappeared. Now, though, it threatened to reduce our “shared actions” to nothing more than a monetary relationship, in which she stood to profit from my alleged status. Of course, I was a researcher, and Zinzi knew that I was writing about our encounters, and of course Zinzi had a family to feed and benefitted from the things I contributed when visiting. But were we not also, in a sense the two of us had negotiated together, *friends*?

Zinzi had taught me more general lessons about the importance of authenticity and trust in the context of Participant Observation, but also with regard to the formation conditions of a *We*-thought more generally. This first of five lessons encompassed the racialized tension Zinzi and I were trying to block out during our encounters with each other and others. We were both aware of being conceived as an odd couple in public. What business did we have together? Was there room for overlapping intentions? My white friends, many of whom thought me reckless for spending time “alone” in the township, warned me about being taken advantage of. It turned out that the majority had never even set foot in the township, other than for charity events. To walk and hang out there was a no-go within walking distance. I now realized that Zinzi had faced similar pressures from the people in her immediate community regarding her relationship with me. Why would she hang out with (someone like) me if not for material benefits? Overall, Zinzi and I had to work harder to establish common ground than two white people or two Black people walking together. We talked about this often, and it helped to form bonds of trust. At some point we both knew that we simply liked each other, and that it was mainly for this reason that we wanted to spend time together.

The first lesson I would like to draw from this is that the racialized tension between Black and white people in South Africa is to be imagined both on an intersubjective and a collective level. While intersubjectively, it surfaces between two individuals trying or failing to share in an action, this tension is also always subject to a social order of expectation how (not) to behave during an interracial encounter. These rules are themselves remnants of a

¹²⁴ The “Black tax” also encompasses Black students sending scholarships to their families rather than spending them on books, online mobile broadband for course material download or renting rooms close to campus, all of which leads to more challenging study conditions.

pervasive system of dehumanizing racial segregation with the implication that as long as “the other” is not imagined as a subject, he or she can be used as a means to an end. The daily togetherness of Makhandian town life, a quarter century after the end of apartheid, reminds us that apartheid was more than a legal system of repressive laws that could be abandoned. It was, as Crapanzano put it, a state of being that radically denies the humanity of the other (1986: 39-40). In effect, working against this divisive power of the past requires not only personal effort, but bears the risk of alienation from one’s own racial community. As apartheid precluded “any contact with people of different races that might undermine the assumption of essential difference” (ibid.: 40), Zinzi and I—and with us a whole nation—were still surrounded by a thought which was deeply ingrained in the social fabric of everyday life: that any interracial encounter would, in one way or another, have to be put in the service of service. The appearance of our two bodies walking next to each other, in the historically charged context of South Africa, was deemed to imply an asymmetrical professional relationship between a white taskmaster (or benefactress) and her Black employee (or beneficiary). Our friendship seemed to lay outside the discursive domain of possible explanations of what we were doing together. If Zinzi and I were seen painting a house together in Makhanda, I dare to guess, no-one would assume that were painting *our* house.

The second lesson, which fundamentally changed the way I looked at my research, was provoked by Zinzi’s calling me out for inauthenticity. Zinzi is a Black Xhosa mother in her thirties, working hard to make ends meet for her family with fruit selling and modest government subsidies. However, as I thought of her as a friend, other things about her came to mind first: private details about her childhood she consigned to me, her aspiration to study management, her worries about the education of her son. I knew where the ramiform scar on her left arm came from and where she had gone to elementary school. I knew her favorite drink and music. I knew how she felt about her long-term partner and why she introduced herself as Zinzi, rather than her given name. I knew her birth name. Vice versa, what did Zinzi know about me? True, she generally refrained from asking personal questions, but I was not open the way I would have been had our past and present been more similar. I considered it insensitive to talk about *my* childhood, aspirations, fears and preferences because my life seemed so much easier in essential ways. I was so concerned not to widen the canyon of differences by sharing personal details about myself that I ended up seeming stand-offish. *I do not know you.*

I remembered our first encounter. Unaware of local interracial conventions and caught in the moment, I shamelessly complained about bagatelles to a Black fruit seller, who in turn openly made fun of me for doing so. In retrospect, this was not only remarkably authentic for the both of us—I love to whine, and she likes to be humorously harsh—but also a reciprocally acknowledged sign of trust. A white person complaining about “white

stuff” to a Black person and the Black person laughing at her for having no idea what life can be like if you are not white was more than testing the limits of the all-pervasive, tacit agreement about how interracial exchange in this segregated social space should go. In the months to come, I would every now and then loosen up and be my whiny self, but more often would hide behind the idea that it is not my place to share my feelings and thoughts.¹²⁵ Zinzi was right to call me out for being unauthentic.

Thinking of my many walking adventures, I now had to admit that I had rarely intentionally revealed much about myself apart from the obligatory clarification that I was a researcher. Only on rare occasions did I make suggestions of where we would go or what we could do because I did not want to dominate the meetings. I revisited my early fieldnotes and found trace evidence of my trying to force myself into new habits. *I need to be more patient, immediately*: perhaps the most ridiculous thought concerning my perceived lack of acclimatization—although certainly not the only one. One of my first noted observations on bodily movements was that everything was slowing down, and that I was uncomfortable with that, but needed to make efforts to adapt as quickly as possible. At some point, I put a red rubber band around my pinky as a reminder. *Look at it, feel it, and be reminded to slow down!*

I was so focused on assimilating that I forgot my own contribution to participation. It takes two to tango, and it turned out that my early suspicion of being a lousy dance partner was correct. But only now did I understand why. In trying too hard to adapt myself to the character of my new surroundings, I was being unauthentic; passively trying to adjust to whatever I thought was going on. I did not feel disengaged because my pace was badly adjusted while walking together with these women, but because I was not doing my part as *a companion*. I had, with time, adapted to the pace of my co-walkers, but in a manner they must have noticed as unauthentic. Of course, they saw me come and go as I approached them or after we parted ways. I would speed up immediately, slowing down only for the walk. *You always so busy?* My least favorite joke was them playfully yelling *Slave driver* whenever I failed to adjust and was pressing ahead.

The problem had not been that I wanted to go faster, but that I pretended that the slow walking was just what I wanted, too. I had been so wrapped up in the thought of adapting that I had forgotten that a shared action, at least the kind I was interested in, does not come into being through mimicry.¹²⁶ Once my foot was in the cast, that changed, and it literally let me pause and feel what was going on. All of a sudden, I had no choice but to

¹²⁵ Part of what made up this social barrier was my frequent tapping into an ever-hovering sense of white guilt: As I am (perceived as) white, I am unobtrusively part of a relation guided by social asymmetry, which impeded intersubjective connection. Zinzi helped me overcome this barrier. By pointing out, on cordial terms, that I was complaining about bagatelles (rather than choosing to be silent on a delicate topic), she showed willingness to engage *and* to disagree, which I take to be a precious combination of affective attitudes.

¹²⁶ When a set of actions appears as unknown, overwhelming or superior to an individual, she can try a behavioristic approach by copying the physical movement. In this discussion about shared action, however, mimicry would fall outside of the domain of what a shared action is unless the mimicry itself is an acknowledged part of the shared action.

take it slow. The context did not call for a fake-it-till-you-make-it approach, but for genuine openness towards the intentions of all participating parties—including mine, which with regards to my own walking preferences I had carefully tried to keep undisclosed. Since I did not explicitly reveal my desire to walk faster—or indeed voice any of my immediate desires—it remained opaque to my research partners if there was something we might have wanted *together*. That changed when I broke my foot: my desire to take it slow became visibly obvious. Out of no choice of my own, I became more authentic.

The solidarity my research partners showed with me once I was in the cast was stunning. I noticed how far ahead they were looking and that they would carefully consider which route to take next that met all our needs. Is there a pothole approaching? Wait for Anna to circumvent. Are the streetlights out again? Then better take the main road, as darkness invites crime against the vulnerable. In time, I was getting more susceptible to what they noticed and how their gait shifted accordingly. Slowing down helped. Some of our issues were overlapping, some not, but they were all incorporated into our shared practice of walking and looking ahead together with the knowledge of what matters to *us*—insofar as we were a unit constituted by the shared intention to walk together. Following their steps and gaze helped to understand their modes of walking as expressions of their intentions. Our walking together, as it grew into a truly shared enterprise, became a way to see the other's intentions as inseparable from the purpose that directed it. The mutual acknowledgement of the other's authentic acting as an intentional, genuine contribution to the shared action unified our enterprise of walking together *as* a shared intentional action. Turning Zinzi's charge into a positive, second lesson, her criticism was an appeal to take authenticity seriously as a necessary component of acting together.¹²⁷

Continuing to go for walks with my research partners under this new, aggravated condition formed a new bond of trust, as some of them let me know. *You come here even when you cannot run away. That's commitment!* The compliment was twofold: It was an appreciation of my continual coming, but also an acknowledgement of the additional risk I put myself in as an obviously easy crime target. Somehow, hobbling had turned me into a better walking companion. This unforeseeable aspect of conducting Participant Observation, I would like to highlight as a third lesson to be drawn, makes part of the reason why participation is a uniquely effective method to fruitfully interpret the lifeworlds of

¹²⁷ As I was slipping into more authentic modes of being, and of being-with, I also realized that it was not a sign of failure that I did not feel completely immersed into every moment of walking together with others in Makhanda. Rather, it was a sign of habitualization that I would wander off—not literally, but in thought—and return to the moment with sensory attention less and less frequently. This can also be understood as a performative resolution to the apparent conundrum surrounding the double mandate of participation and observation underlying anthropology's discipline-defining research method. Recalling the problem, Bourdieu writes that Participant Observation “presupposes a kind of doubling of consciousness that is arduous to sustain. How can one be both subject and object, the one who acts and the one who, as it were, watches himself acting?” Bourdieu (2003: 281). As Jackson puts it elegantly, such an “oscillation between being a part of and being apart from is [...] not peculiar to ethnographic or empirical methods. It is the nature of human consciousness itself, for our minds are continually and spontaneously moving between absorption in tasks and reflection on it—between doing something without thinking and thinking about what we are doing” (2012: 8).

others. This is to say, the contingency and unpredictability of human experience is in itself a worthwhile aspect to be considered in anthropological fieldwork.

Two more lessons to be drawn: Calling attention to yet another methodological aspect illuminated by practicing Participant Observation, Zinzi implicitly confirmed an illuminating quality of walking together as a shared action in fraught, socially and racially segregated public space. Explaining to me the social tension that arose whenever I was visiting her house—sitting in plain sight for all of her neighbors to see—she highlighted a downside of openly displaying our friendship. When walking, by contrast, we were in transit together, neither here nor there. Undisturbed by other people’s expectations of what our walking together could mean, we were in motion together, on our own terms, and could let go of the problems we encountered when either one of us was assigned the role of a host. Walking together alleviated some of the tension we encountered when staying in one place; the shared action created a private space in public, allowing us to together focus on the world ahead of and between us rather than the space that according to the surrounding communities belonged to either her *or* me. In this sense, the fourth lesson empirically confirms my previously theoretically established assumption that walking together is a particularly promising mode of Participant Observation.

The fifth and final lesson to be teased out from the above train of thoughts provoked by Zinzi’s remark is about the possibility failure offers to help understand the conditions of specific, local forms of participation. I have established that shared immersion in a perceptual field opens up a shared view not only of the landscape ahead, but of its context-specific significance. This shared attention, again, is not simply attainable by following ostensive gestures, but there already needs to be in place some understanding of what to *look for*, which in turn has to be established in the context of a specific field site. My research partners and I needed a shared sphere of perceptual attention, which took time to build. Now, the claim that it takes time to understand the complexity of a foreign social setting is itself not controversial, but rather self-evident. My claim, however, is that it is the difficulty of (mis)understanding itself that distinguishes Participant Observation as a worthwhile research method. Rather than seeing the process of learning merely as an unavoidable preparatory factor that is followed by a time of gathering information “in the light” of sufficient contextual knowledge, the period of getting things wrong, in my case, turned out to be an integral part of the understanding itself. This is because attention emerges where habits are disrupted, where things go wrong and alleged understanding turns out to be misunderstanding. Disrupting one’s own habits, then, is not a precursor, but a component of ethnographic knowledge.

5.4 Slowdown as resistance

The foregoing observations, sparked by Zinzi's call for authenticity, speak to the epistemological and methodological problems that played a prominent role in earlier chapters of this book. Concrete aspects of my research partners' lives function here in the service of methodological inquiry, indicating how it is possible for a researcher to participate in shared actions with their research partners, thereby obtaining practical knowledge of their lifeworlds. But my goal in going to Makhanda had first and foremost been to understand the people who lived there. What did my successes in developing trust with certain Black women in Makhanda reveal about the life experiences of Black people in South Africa more generally? What did I know after having established these relationships that I did not grasp *before* I had these methodological successes?

In the previous chapter, I dwelled on the connection between modes of waiting and stagnation. For some of the women I walked with, their walking slowly was the outward manifestation of an inner stagnation and indifference, the product of lifelong experience of waiting, directly and indirectly, for the state. Their indifference, which revealed itself bodily in how carelessly they crossed streets and in their repeatedly missing meetings and opening hours through their slowness, could be experienced first-hand by walking together. But ostensibly, one did not need to engage in shared action to observe these things. The same outward manifestations could be observed from a disengaged distance, for example. It was also explicitly confirmed by what they said in conversation. Strictly speaking, I did not need to walk with these women to gain that information: I could have set up a lookout at the corner of Bathurst and High Street, perhaps combining my observations with a series of interviews.

One way to answer this challenge would be to consider whether there are features specific to the shared action that contribute to the richness of the knowledge that is thereby gained. I suspect, for example, that walking together as a means to share a perceptual field surely helped, although I do not have the evidence to build a case for its necessity. There was, however, a different discovery I made in the course of walking together with the women of Makhanda, and I believe a strong case can be made that this discovery would not have been possible without participation.

5.4.1 Noticing intentions

In Makhanda, everything slowed down for me. Getting to university, buying coffee, waiting for friends: it all became a task with a potential duration of forever. This was not something that only occurred when I broke my foot. It had been the first thing I noted when first arriving as a still-agile pedestrian.

Participation meant slowing down, and this was hard—especially when freshly arriving from my hometown, Basel. My life there is streamlined and efficient. I tended to feel like I “shouldn’t have to” wait for anything—which is not so much a sign of efficiency, but of privilege. Through the tension between my then-normal walking pace and the slower rhythm of Makhandian public space, the difference was imposing; it helped to be an outsider at first. To rephrase the fifth lesson drawn above: the rupture I encountered had its own revealing quality that resided in the felt difference itself.

During this period of learning, I began to notice more subtle nuances of how Black and white Makhandians were crossing paths in public. At the beginning of my pre-cast research period, I entertained a habit of walking faster than anyone in Makhanda, Black or white. Gearing down, I found myself developing a walking habit closer to the pace of white South Africans. I was now part of a local pedestrian group that sets the general walking pace of the city center, but is regularly thwarted by Black pedestrians who not only have a slower pace, but also tend to walk in groups that would have to be circumvented or waited behind. When partaking in group walks with Black walking partners in the city center, I regularly experienced white people, alone or in groups, passing us by. Sometimes, they would give us looks of annoyance, or else utter the very (South African) British “sorry” as they stepped into the street, overtaking us who were, to them, clogging the pedestrian’s path.

As I described earlier, I often felt during such group walks that with most of my research partners, walking slowly was a sign of indifference and in this sense, of a lack of clearly directed intention with regards to that specific bodily action. Yet in the course of sharing their perceptual field over a long period of time, I became more attentive to what they saw and started to notice subtle hints that suggested a very different interpretation. A tempered gait, it dawned on me, could just as well be the expression of a very clear-cut intention. Crucially, it could be an expression of resilience against an abiding power structure.

Another remnant of the past, the informal “zoning” of public space into different walking speed zones, brings to mind the Group Areas Act of 1950, which mandated residential and business zones in cities for each racial group. Other races could neither live in nor own land in those areas. In effect, by the late 1950s, more than 80 percent of South Africa’s land was owned by whites, and non-whites had to carry documents allowing them to enter restricted areas. Though that policy has been abandoned, its impact lingers on. Zinzi lives in a large, marginalized township, created to segregate Black people. Today, Eluxolweni, Joza, and five other extensions of the Makhanda East community collectively referred to as “the township” are still all-Black neighborhoods. The very name “extension”, which is how locals refer to those different parts of township, is reminiscent of the idea of an add-on to the “main” part of the city.

Intensifying the feeling of hierarchical segregation, the walking pace in the center of town is driven by the pace of white people—although the post office and the local bank branch located there serve not only the 8% of whites but also the remaining 92%. When walking through High Street, the town’s center lane with its colonial style buildings, the city appears predominantly white, and generally the movement of bodies is faster than in the township. Whites hop out of their cars in front of restaurants and shops, where they consume goods while young Black men wait to guard their cars for 2-5 Rand, rain or shine. White shoppers jump back into their private safe spaces in public, dominating the government-financed roads supposedly built for everyone.

As a pedestrian, one has to be creative and claim public space differently. I started noticing that some Black women would cross the streets in an interesting way. Rather than looking at traffic, they would make a point of looking elsewhere: up; down; at me, their walking companion. Moreover, by tilting their heads away from approaching traffic as they were slowly stepping into the street, they would signal that they do not see the approaching car—forcing the driver to stop. All of this would happen in slow motion. At first, I simply thought this to be another unintentional expression of carelessness, and urged my walking partners to look out for approaching vehicles instead of turning their gaze towards me. Later, however, I saw that this was in fact an effective (albeit not completely riskless) technique of crossing the street without having to wait for a (probably white) driver to kindly stop.

Overall, the sedate walking rhythm of my Black walking companions began to appear to me as an act of resistance against white people, rushing by in a hurry because they “have *things* to do”. My research partners were not giving into this normative notion of time-efficient commuting, but in their walking performed resistance against the white rhythm of busyness. Apart from taking up more time, walking slowly meant openly breaking with the whites, whose strategy often was to flee public space so as not to become a target for begging and mugging. While I had received the advice—from white person to white person—to never amble and always look like I was heading somewhere, Zinzi pointed out to me that *if they want to get you, they will come and get you. If they want to pass—* she was now switching to talk about white people—*let them find their own way.* Zinzi was not going to make her everyday life be determined by fear or other people’s stresses. Like many other Black women that I walked with, she was intentionally performing an act that ran counter to the speed forced upon her in midtown—which was otherwise dominated by the pace of the 8% of white locals.

In time, this collection of experiences began to weave itself into a new holistic picture of movement; one that took into account not only how people moved but, crucially, *why* they did so. This, in turn, sharpened my gaze and made me more attentive towards the manifold *hows*. I was now ready to perceive, for instance, my walking partner’s subtle gaze

away from a passing white pedestrian or a slight deceleration, because I knew what it all was *for*. This knowledge, to take this mutual reaction just one step further, not only turned me into a more attentive observer, but a better, more complicit walking participant because I was now able to intentionally support the collective aim. Once *this* was recognized, I was openly and propositionally let in on “the secret”: *Let them wait*. Vuyokazi smiled and took my arm. Beginning to share the perceptual field of my walking companions, I would now notice layers of intentions that were guided by the overarching intention to reclaim ground and renegotiate power relations.

5.4.2 Bodily participation as intention tracker

At the beginning of my research, I was so focused on adapting to the new walking pace that I failed to consider that walking slowly was, perhaps, *supposed to be* a tense mode of walking *for me*. Of course, ambling around together can be extremely relaxing for anyone. But in public space where Black and white pedestrians intersect, thwarting others should not only be seen as a random byproduct of a way of being, but should be considered as a political act in its own right. In Makhanda, it was a way of reclaiming public space that was for a long time primarily for white people. The disruption of having someone in your way and slowing you down, like a car driving under the speed limit in front of you, was only fully tangible as a bodily experience. Once I had gained awareness of this aspect of group pacing, it was hard to miss. Bodily participation, in my case, enabled me to open my perceptual field to this experience that imposed itself in the experiential transit of my gradual learning. With one foot in the cast, I benefited from the above-described boost of trust, which in turn gave me deeper insights into the significance of my walking companions’ everyday movements. They were now, so to speak, sharing their attentive gaze with me. In practice, this manifested itself in their holding my arm as we walked towards or in front of a swiftly approaching white person, externally signaling our togetherness as a walking unit. Well-aware that they were thereby producing what was effectively a little walking barricade, they were now willing to let me join in their practice.

Reconnecting to my previous claims about the embodiment of colonial memory, I believe we can frame walking slowly in Makhanda as a bodily articulation of protest. Racial segregation and socio-political delegitimation have “physical symptoms” that manifest themselves, for both the oppressors and the oppressed, in everyday experiences of public space. Precisely because of this, the everyday activity of walking has become a powerful tool to reshape power relations, reordering public space “from below”.

It is worth pausing to spell out the theoretical implications of the claim that through walking slowly, social norms are reshaped *from below*: Walking slowly, a mode of walking together that emerged out of everyday practice of township dwellers, affects the whole city. Against a model of agency that assumes the colonizer to be the only one implementing rules

that determine public space, walking emerged as a powerful pacemaker of the city, and walking *together* as a display of solidarity and resistance.

I was now, one foot in the cast, invited to be part of that resistance. It took me a while to get comfortable with the feeling of standing in the way and not being able to swiftly step aside or speed up when other white people behind me were trying to pass. Once I had made my peace with it, it was glorious. I was overcome by a feeling of empowerment against what I now perceived as aggressive rushing by those who were able to do what I, at the time, could not. Again, my reason for being excluded from “white business” was vastly different from the reasons of the Black population. My injury was temporarily and self-inflicted; their more abstract injuries were continuous, systematic, and open-ended. Walking slowly was a way to make those who rushed self-importantly around feel their lives being put on halt, their important plans thwarted, even if just for a moment.

Walking together targets the bodily dimension of this resilient practice. The women I walked with possess embodied, non-predicative knowledge of these sanctions, embedded in their everyday actions and movement in public space. By walking with them, my perspective merged into theirs, and let me experience one of their intentional bodily reactions to government inaction they have endured their whole lives. Feeling both the reluctance and willfulness that fueled the movement of walking allows for an understanding of how the political sphere reaches into not only everyday habits, but the bodily realm of approaching public space. To be sure: the modes of walking I shared into must be seen as active agency, not passive victimhood. Walking together, in this context, meant understanding and rising to meet entrenched forces of oppression. In this sense, walking together with Black women in post-apartheid South Africa offered a practicing platform to understand not only how apartheid affects them in their everyday practices today, but also how the political past of the country is sedimented in their bodies. It was also, crucially, a method of research that allowed me to see my research partners *as agents*, actively and intentionally shaping the conditions of their present everyday lives.

5.5 Theoretical implications for participation

Stasis can foster stagnation and indifference; but it can also (as in the case of a swelling stream or a coiled spring) lead to a build-up of energy that induces movement. The movement of walking slowly in a busy environment functions as an intentional act of creating bodily tension by moderating not only one’s own pace, but the faster flux of one’s surroundings. Seen as an intentional act—that is, also, an act *in tension*—walking slowly

need not only be a sign of stagnation and indifference, but can also be one of resistance.¹²⁸ Extending this practice into a shared action requires attentiveness from all participants, intending not only to keep the group's walking pace but also to "tighten up" as a walking unit that resists the surrounding stream of white business. This attentiveness, which can be framed as a local skill to observe what matters in a specific context, is non-propositional and participatory in nature.

To this end, I would like to draw some final theoretical conclusions about the significance of shared intension in participation, based on my practical experiences. In this section I will first offer two categories—'space' and 'time'—and a connecting theme—*waiting*—for an overarching interpretation of my findings (in 5.5.1) and then move to a close-up conceptualization of my main operating terms 'trust', 'points of commonality' and 'vulnerability' as three core concepts of this chapter to be spelled out (in 5.5.2).

5.5.1 Space, time and waiting

We can interpret my findings by means of two categories and one connecting theme.

'Space' is the category in which South Africa's history of unequal spatial segregation, domination, and misappropriation of land surfaces through the bodily practice of walking together. We can here reconnect to the challenge of context-dependence. Context, especially the still deeply embedded social asymmetries of apartheid, is crucial to understanding the everyday practices of Black people today in South Africa. The plotlines of their individual lives are intertwined with the collective history of their country. The first "free-born" generation, I have claimed, have incorporated within their ways of moving about a resistance to the legacy of apartheid through resilient bodily movement in public space.

'Time' is the category which highlights Black South Africans' experience of waiting: for water, for land, for passports, for housing—all things promised by a government shaken by corruption following a long history of colonial administration. Here, we can hark back to the challenge of non-propositional knowledge, which I showed to be central to an understanding of the lifeworld of the Black South African population today. While walking together with my research partners, I witnessed stagnation, but also refusal and resistance to make way for white people, slowing down and grouping rather than circumventing others as a way of standing their ground and reshaping the rules of public space. The perception of time, in this context, depends on unequal opportunities to reach life-goals like owning a house or making a career. In people's everyday lives, these overarching goals manifest themselves in non-propositional modes of moving about. Rupturing another's

¹²⁸ Thanks to Tim Ingold who, in an email exchange between September and December 2019, pointed out to me the etymological connection between 'intention' and 'tension'.

bodily rhythm, which can itself be an expression of a subjectively felt value of time, means irritating their planning horizon and, through irritation, can tacitly force awareness of this difference upon them. Walking together slowly, in this sense, is an effective Black strategy to practice resistance and raise, on a non-propositional level, awareness of the inequality of how much a person's (life-)time is worth. However, regardless of the actual impact of this practice on the white population, it bears significance regardless of its external effects. The way I perceived the shared practice of walking slowly, it was an expression of authentic alignment with one's own value-attribution of time.

The experience of *waiting* provides a thematic unity to what I perceived as I was walking together with my research partners. First of all, the history of waiting naturally connects to the history of spatial apartheid—that is, apartheid of bodies. To understand the meaning of waiting in South Africa, we need to study its segregating past reaching into the present. And, looking at it from the here and now: to understand the depth of impact apartheid still has on the spatial, bodily movements of South Africa's population today, we require non-propositional knowledge of their everyday practices in public space. Waiting is a context-bound, bodily experience whose quality is felt according to one's individual (life) experience of time. Drawing on this knowledge to produce ethnographic content, in the framework of my project, means to put into words how exactly waiting impacts the bodily practices of my research partners *as* responses to past and present spacial segregation.

Building on this insight, a crucial part of my ethnographic work was to track down local meanings of 'waiting'. This second aspect in which *waiting* provides a thematic unity to my project leads back to the issue of conceptual convergence. 'Waiting', in post-apartheid South Africa today, receives a context-specific meaning that is all-pervasive in people's everyday lives as a remnant of the past. Usually, 'waiting' is conceptualized as future-directed and tied to something to wait *for*. But in the open-ended non-arrival of so much that was promised to the "free-born" generation growing up after 1994, 'waiting' obtains the character of permanence opposed to its ordinary meaning and oddly points back into the past.

Thirdly, the experience of waiting highlights the methodological potential of bodily habituation inherent to Participant Observation. By this I do not mean the waiting for a specific habit to "kick in" in the final period of long-term field research. Rather, the omnipresence of waiting—and of letting others wait—reveals the relative (un)importance and (lack of) value of time, which in turn has practical implications and directly impacts the bodily habitus of South African people. Moving in-between the waiting and the retarding position, my phase of transition and learning about local meanings of waiting obtained itself a revealing quality. My broken foot certainly did not fundamentally change my overall planning horizon, but it stalled much of what I intended to do in a way that

turned out to be similar enough to the thwarting aspects in my research partners' life for them to see it as a connecting point of commonality.

5.5.2 Trust, points of commonality and vulnerability

My analysis in this chapter has introduced some concepts that will profit from theoretical development: 'trust', 'points of commonality', and 'vulnerability'.

Of the three, I take 'trust' to be the most fundamental concept for shared action. Trust is an affective attitude that co-creates a sphere of acknowledging and sharing each other's intentions. In anthropological literature, trust is widely acknowledged as a societal resource that defines and shapes all spheres of everyday life, on an individual as well as an institutional level (Cohen and Sheringham 2016). The process of regaining trust after conflict has been thoroughly researched, especially in relation to statehood (Koechlin and Förster 2015). Post-apartheid South Africa represents a complex case, however, in that it cannot simply be labelled "post-conflict". For although it possesses standard liberal democratic institutions (open elections, equality under the law, constitutional government etc.), racial inequality is still a lived reality for the majority of citizens.

I have explored how this situation affects the social spheres of Black South Africans today. Ethnographically, I have examined how trust can be negotiated in personal interactions and how the bodily dimension of its absence can be a consequence of trust—or distrust—in an overarching structure or system. The example I gave in chapter 4 was the distrust in government and its effects on affective attitudes towards others. I have shown how institutional distrust in governmental offices and officials translates into a basic social distrust in the generalized "other", as well as interpersonal distrust in already existing relationships. In this way, the institutional and the personal dimension of (dis)trust interlace and affect the bodily dimension of shared everyday practices. I thus frame trust as a necessary ingredient for participation that plays a fundamental role in the conceptualization of shared action as an affective attitude.

Borrowing from Schmid (2013), I call the transformative nature of this affective attitude that enabled me to partially share into the perceptual field of my walking partners "the Power of Trust", according to which trust is a partially self-fulfilling attitude (ibid.: 50-51). Schmid's view differs from instrumentalist conceptions of trust as a bet on others' future behavior (as prominently found in Hardin 2006). Rather, the idea behind "the Power of Trust" is that attitudes towards the future help fulfil its desired becoming. Although Schmid's view does not explicitly exclude a theoretical underpinning of probability calculation inherent to Hardin's view, but it implicitly hints at an alternative more clearly expressed in Förster (*unpublished manuscript*), according to which trust is to be seen as a genuinely social phenomenon. The point here is not that the *outcome* of trust happens to be social cohesion or some sort of team spirit—although that might be true as well—but that

its transformative power is already invested in the very act of trusting. This undergirds my hypothesis that walking together is trust-producing from the beginning:

Once I was entering public space with the visible vulnerability of my cast, I signaled a basic form of trust towards my environment.¹²⁹ This basic attitude I openly displayed towards my surroundings was well-received in part because it signaled positive expectations towards my social surrounding. One could say that I was perceived as representing my research partners as being trustworthy walking companions, thus making it more likely that they would in fact do their part because I provided them with a normative reason to do so.¹³⁰ Incorporating this insight into the methodological framework of Participant Observation, we can postulate that displaying trust in one's research partners is a fundamental precondition for conducting participatory fieldwork.¹³¹

Moving on to the second of the three interlaced concepts to be scrutinized, I define a 'point of commonality' as a connecting feature between two or more individuals that is mediated by a third entity—the content of the point of commonality—which all sharing participants are related to individually. Such an entity can function as a supportive factor to both show and gain trust. Its content can be a common possession of an attribute, but also its loss or absence.

A point of commonality resembles a mutuality that is openly recognized and acknowledged by all parties involved. While the way in which a point of commonality is shared can be either propositional or non-propositional, its mutual recognition represents a necessary condition for its instantiation. A point of commonality can emerge through the visibility of common interests, privileges or problems. In my case, it was the burden of walking, which I characterize as a mode of vulnerability recognized non-propositionally by my research partners as a point of commonality. Some points of commonality can be recognized non-propositionally, for instance visually (by spotting a casted foot) or through shared activities (by noticing a person's hobbling), while others have to be put into propositional form (by talking about one's life circumstances).

Points of commonality can unfold their connecting power in quantitative and qualitative ways. We can share many superficial points of commonality which may or may not be, in their quantity, relevant for the formation of a connection. We might both, for instance, like pizza, miss our dead cats, and have nothing at home for dinner. These three

¹²⁹ To a lesser degree, I had already displayed trust before, simply by repeatedly entering the township on my own on foot. As described in chapter 4, some of the younger township dwellers would at first jokingly point out that it is dangerous for a white person to do that, but the subsequent interactions I had with them were mainly marked by hospitality and reciprocal trust.

¹³⁰ Schmid (2013) elaborates in detail on how interpersonal trust comes into being as a partially self-fulfilling attitude. For a thorough, complementary examination of the characteristics of an affective attitude, see also Karen Jones' 1996 paper, "Trust as an affective attitude."

¹³¹ Lest I give the impression of presenting the importance of interpersonal trust as a novel insight into anthropological theory: The proposition that trust helps to found and foster social interactions is as well-established as, perhaps, the stern disciplinary belief in the revealing powers of participation itself. What I offer here is a conceptual refinement and integration of trust into the offered framework of shared action.

points of commonality do not have to, but can, form bonds of trust when added up and shared.

I distinguish between superficial points of commonality that do not require trust and connective points of commonality that might require trust. While the latter are steppingstones for participation, and a single one of them can have a strong connecting power, the former lack this capacity. In my case study, a single point of commonality turned out to be sufficient to form a basic bond of trust, and thus connective. That point was the vulnerability of walking in public space described above. As I have shown, such a point of commonality can help to temporarily overcome social asymmetry. I have added a one-sided restriction with regard to who can claim it. While there needs to be mutual recognition of an overlapping interest, privilege or problem to turn into a connective point of commonality, the asymmetry of a social setting requires for the more vulnerable one to suggest a connection. In my case study, it was the connection of my walking partners I would not have dared to make between their and my pain.

Last but not least, I conceptualize ‘vulnerability’ as a mode of potentially visible suffering that consists in being exposed to the possibility of being physically or emotionally harmed. Its visibility depends, on the one hand, on the attentiveness of those engaging with the vulnerable and, on the other, on their willingness and ability of the latter to display their vulnerability. Once recognized, vulnerability is one of many possible instantiations of a point of commonality.

In order for vulnerability to become a point of commonality, it is not enough to be and/or feel vulnerable, but the specific content of vulnerability has to be (made) visible to someone. That person is the presumed relatum of the relation between the point of commonality and trust. In this way, points of commonality can, but do not have to be a causal consequence of vulnerability. Whether or not it is a consequence hinges on whether the vulnerability is perceived and acknowledged as a mutual trait.

In my case study, vulnerability manifested itself in the daily act of walking as a necessary means of transportation in a potentially harmful environment. The visible, tangible and unchangeable fact of my broken foot did not have to be, but was acknowledged as a point of commonality with and for other women who, too, had to walk to work. It was visible for my research partners, just as it was visible to me that many of them were walking daily with heavy loads on their heads, with unfit or no footwear, limps and other visible pains. My research partners walk many miles with insufficient clothing while anticipating and suffering depletion of one’s body as both short- and long-term effects. Their vulnerability actualized under duress of regularly exposing themselves to the perils of public space notorious for physical violence, and by the existential threat of income loss in case of temporal inability to (walk to) work.

However, vulnerability can be less obvious as it might, in some cases, require a broader knowledge of a person's life circumstances. While it was easy to spot my physical vulnerability without knowing a single thing about my life story, other manifestations of vulnerability require the knowledge that, for instance, she who walks with a limp has no other choice to make a living for herself and her four children. It presupposes contextual knowledge that an iteksi costs 10 Rand from the township to the center, that 20 Rand is too high an amount for her to spend daily, that part of the alleys leading from her home to her workplace are notorious for muggings and rape in the early mornings when she has to pass, and so forth. Recognizing a person's vulnerability, in this sense, is to know and acknowledge the vulnerability of her life as a whole.

Linking these three core concepts, I have suggested that trust between me and my research partners followed from our sharing the point of commonality of walking in a state of vulnerability. My case study thus suggests a direct causal relation between the three. However, as I tried to show, the ways in which a personal connection comes into being is to some degree contingent and incidental. On the one hand, as elaborated above, trust can come into being, gradually, through points of commonalities. In such a case, trust becomes a causal consequence of points of commonalities relevant to the lives of people potentially forming a bond of trust. On the other hand, there is a sense in which points of commonalities presuppose trust. To understand this better, we can get on board the above the concept of vulnerability as a possible instantiation of a point of commonality. Somewhat obviously, the recognition of another person's vulnerability requires a basic sense in which one pays attention to her. In addition, I might only know the relevant background information—and thus points of commonality—of a person's life circumstances because this person has, in her vulnerability, opened up to me, which in turn requires a basic sense of trust. In this way, the three concepts are mutually dependent, and each co-responsible for the germination of shared actions.

The web of conditions under which a shared action can emerge is of course much more complex, as we have seen in chapter 2. Crucially, the question remains how *shared intention*, which is central to all discussed philosophical accounts of shared action, interlinks with above conceptions of trust, its precursors and effects. As the findings of this final chapter are to be linked up with my previous upshots, the following overall conclusion contains a final attempt to explain how the findings of my field study bear on philosophical questions about shared action and participation.

5.6 Conclusion: shared intention in participation

The focus of this book has been a set of problems inherent to the method of Participant Observation. As should be clear by now, however, I have a sympathetic view of this

methodology and believe in its value for anthropological research. In previous chapters, I have sought to show that the theoretical problems Participant Observation faces are worthwhile challenges that need not reflect a weakness, but can be turned into a unique strength of anthropological fieldwork. In this and the last chapter, I have sought to undergird this line of thought from the perspective of my own subjective experience of (initially) trying and failing and (eventually) succeeding at participating in a shared activity that is universally accessible for pedestrian humankind, yet always interspersed with cultural and historical specificity. I walked together with Black women in post-apartheid South Africa.

This last chapter had a triple mandate. On a content-level, it showed how colonial memory is sedimented in everyday practices of Black women in South Africa today. On a methodological level, it pointed out the unique assets of Participant Observation as a research method by illustrating the emergence of perceptual common knowledge through long-term participation. On a theoretical level, these findings were linked up with action-theoretical claims about the conditions of participation. Before drawing my ultimate conclusions from this discussion (5.6.2 and following), I would like to offer some final thoughts about how my empirical data could help refine the philosophical frameworks of shared action that I have discussed (5.6.1).

5.6.1 The Anscombian account of shared intentional action

What is it that makes us participants? Specific conditions of participation are hard to pin down. Yet, as argued in chapter 1, it would be crucial to have some consensus on how the community of anthropologists should use the term.

A promising way to deal with this problem, I have suggested in chapter 2, is to turn to philosophy of action, which offers an array of theories on how to conceptualize participation (or, in the vocabulary of philosophy of action, “shared action”) and its surrounding phenomena. Common to all discussed theories is their reliance on intentions as a core ingredient of participation. Indeed, philosophy of action, despite its division into rival camps and disagreement about what intentions are, collectively offers good reasons for why participation must be intentional. Philosophers are interested in what distinguishes a mere bodily movement (such as a muscular reflex) from an action. The presence of an intention to act as a cause of the movement, according to many, seems to be that thing. Let me link the empirical findings recorded in this chapter with the theoretical upshots from chapters 2 and 3 regarding the possibility of participation.

Following philosophers of action, I recommend a concept of participation that encompasses shared intentions as a core trait. Firmly installing this notion of participation into the methodological framework of Participant Observation supports the aims of contemporary anthropologists to conduct participatory fieldwork that is more than merely

“observation at a distance” or passive “tagging along”. The philosophical requirement on shared intention as a necessary component of shared action is a welcome reminder for anthropologists to authentically participate and “take up space” in the action they want to understand. Philosophical theories of shared action can, if used with caution, help to determine ideal theoretical conditions that the researcher who seeks to use participation as a method of research can practically work towards in the field.

A basic point to be made about Participant Observation is that it does not, nor should it, claim to be equal to participation *from the beginning*. Rather, the method denotes a *goal* to be reached over time. As a yardstick to measure successful participation, ideal notions of shared action are helpful to keep anthropological standards for what counts as participation from dropping unreasonably low. In this respect, Bratman’s “planning theory” of shared agency helped us appreciate the significance of common knowledge for an action to be truly shared, and Gilbert’s plural subject theory helped us see that a common contextual background plays a decisive role in the formation of a shared action.

My “case study in the cast” showed how shared intentions can emerge through interpersonal points of commonality, the presence of which can suffice to join into a shared action such as walking together. I have argued that simple acknowledgement of the other is sufficient to allow the other’s intention to surface and a shared intention to potentially emerge. Indisputable knowledge of the other’s intention is not required. What matters is the mutual recognition of the other as having, at least in part, shared intentions—for instance, to get to work safely. To put it another way: it is not so much deep knowledge of a specific action but rather a kind of general “like-mindedness” that creates the possibility for true participation.

I have repeatedly indicated that I take an Anscombian framework of shared intentional action to be the most fruitful approach for anthropological method building. This is because Anscombe’s theory does justice to a fundamental aspect of fieldwork practice, that is the primary focus on and the acknowledgement of the subject rather than the content of the action.

In the context of fieldwork practice, as discussed in this last chapter, learning is not to be understood as an isolated episode of training for a skill. Rather, learning means a more holistic way to appropriately approach social everyday life—and thus: other subjects—in accordance with local ideals of how to be together. This metamorphosis encompasses one’s perceptual attentiveness, habits and dispositions. I have spelled out the relationship between observation and participation in chapter 1, arguing that they are both participatory in nature. Observation, too, is a *social* practice of learning, by engaging with another subject, how and what to perceive.

Learning, as a part of fieldwork practice—and in a broader sense understood as guiding much of our lives as social beings—involves a gradual process of adaptation to local

modes of perception that comes into being through participation, which turn into new habits of what to notice. When adapting to a new surrounding, our standard mode of focused attention has to shift towards local forms of attentiveness and mindfulness. We need to recalibrate not only what we mind, but why, and link these new forms of attention (and inattention) to local habits, aesthetic experience and affordances.¹³²

How does this relate to the Anscombian ideal of a shared intentional action? I suggest that the notion of attention and learning can be synthesized into an Anscombian approach by recalling the most fundamental traits of her theory of framing any intentional action, solitary and shared. In line with the qualitative view, her conception of intention proposes that intentional action is qualitatively different from a mere event and that an intention to perform an action is inseparable from the action itself. Intentional action, solitary and shared, is distinct in that it is intrinsically directed and aimed to encompass our purposes. Paying attention, then, is not to be understood as gaining observational knowledge, but (somewhat contrarily) as a manner of being perceptually guided by the intentions intrinsic to the action.

We can furthermore recall that in Anscombe's qualitative view, intentional action can be unreflective, carried out without monitoring awareness. To some degree, this is also true in the causal view. Its main condition for an action to be intentional is that a bodily movement must be caused by an intentional mental state; there is no requirement that the subject also be conscious of the mental state that is causing the action. My point, however, is that in the qualitative view, the development of common knowledge into propositional form happens *in the shared action*. The process of learning, failing, and slowly finding propositional form for one's intentions, is thus part of the account. By contrast, in the causal view, since the shared intention has to already be there in order for a shared action to form, there cannot be such a development *in the shared action*. Rather, the content of *J*-ing together has to already be in the future participants' minds, to then cause the intentional action. From this I conclude that the qualitative view, as developed from an Anscombian account of intention, is well-suited for anthropology, as it allows for anthropological modes of learning to be incorporated into a gradual approximation to the ideal of a shared intentional action. Gradually, a shared intention comes into being; *not* through an already fully shared background, a common perceptual field or absolute conceptual convergence. Rather, it is a partially self-fulfilling affective attitude towards the other—what I have called, borrowing from Schmid, “the Power of Trust”—that instigates a shared doing and, in this view: *thus*, a shared intending. Instead of zooming in on the *content* of the action itself, Participant Observation focuses, as an Anscombian approach of shared intentional action suggests, on the human beings, the *subjects*, we seek to understand. This is to say

¹³² With affordances I mean what James J. Gibson had in mind when he defined the term for the social sciences as what the environment offers the individual, “what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill” (Gibson 1979: 127).

that shared intention, in the field and elsewhere, comes into being as the collective, genuine effort to be, if only for a little while, *with* the other.

This brings us back full circle to the empirical findings of this last chapter that undergird my philosophical claims. What follows is a final attempt to tie down a set of empirical, methodological and theoretical findings.

5.6.2 Agency of resistance instead of victimhood

Agency is easy to spot when accompanied with propositional expression of its inherent intentions—for instance, during a strike or protest where people, walking together, take their intentions to the street, painted on posters on sticks and shouted through megaphones. Agency of resistance is harder to notice in the absence of extraordinary events. Exploring the everyday, public social life of a small city in post-apartheid South Africa, I have found that intentional acts of emancipation are not only present in moments of explicit protest, but tacitly practiced in the non-propositional realm of walking together.

In this last chapter, I have explored the embodiment of resistance. I have found that remnants of apartheid indeed linger on in bodily practices of approaching public space, and have placed my research partner's bodily responses to these remnants in the intentional realm of resistance. Rather than seeing the lack or swelling of movement as a sign for a lack of intention, I have argued that Black slow motion can also be read as an affective and effective way to oppose white currents of business. I have thus portrayed Black South African agency as actively both reshaping and reclaiming public space through bodily resistance.

The women whose paths I was invited to share allowed me to partake in their daily routine of reclaiming public space. With one foot in a cast, I was able to participate in this practice as a member of the vulnerable group of pedestrians. What we shared, then, was not mainly a specific practice that is walking together, but the intention to resist a still-pervasive, white privilege of being busy and moving forward with their lives. While for me, the reason for deprivation of that privilege was obvious and temporary, my walking partner's lives were permeated with spatial and temporal constrictions marked by uncertainty. Forced into an open-ended waiting position, they are reminded by every lecturer asking to please wait with the vacuum cleaning, every white mother "desperately" needing help because she has "a million things to do", that the value of time is not in their hands, but (post-)colonially determined.

The empirical material presented in this book suggests that agency can pierce victimhood by counter-acting against dominant forces to move in a certain way. Indeed, as I sought to show, in a place where moving fast is often an expression of privilege, thwarting is a powerful tool of making others feel the difference.

5.6.3 Feeling the difference

I have shown how the lifeworlds and everyday practices of the people in Makhanda are visibly shaped by the town's history and its country's politics, which can be reflected in habitual bodily practice that is under investigation when walking together is applied as a method of research. The history of South African apartheid is still inscribed into the bodily practices of its Black citizens, expressed, for instance, in the act of walking together as a display of resignation, but also of intentional acts of resistance. When I broke my foot, I also broke with my deeply entrenched walking habits. Forced to slow down and to feel what it is to be vulnerable in public space—even for very different reasons than my research partners—allowed first points of commonality to emerge, which in turn helped to form bonds of trust. Context, then, turned out to matter in a different way than initially anticipated: Although important, it is not sufficient to acquire contextual knowledge about the past and present of a social space and its inhabitants to form these bonds of trust. In fact, it seems as if context is just as likely to cause misunderstandings as it is to support avoid it. My initial misunderstanding concerning the (lack of) clear-cut intentions related to walking slowly is a case in point, for it reveals my intuition to follow an overarching, western narrative of victimhood and lack of agency of Black people on the African continent inscribed in most history books. Crucially, the intuition to interpret a slow gait as an expression of stagnation is a typical mistake to make *in that context*. Rather than only striving for contextual knowledge “from the outside”—which is the kind of context Johannes Fabian (2001: 33-52) has in mind when critiquing the anthropological tendency to invoke context as a means to avoid or repair misunderstanding—there needs to be a *shared* context “from the inside” which I have rather clumsily called friendship. In cross-cultural social settings like the one I have attempted to portray in my case study, where interpersonal connection is constantly and sustainably impeded by historical disparities, the bond of cultural similarity, sameness in race, upbringing, class and so forth that much of philosophical action theory has in mind needs to be of a different kind. This different type of bond, I suggest, can be of a unique intersubjective, interpersonal kind. Experiencing the racial divide *interpersonally*, as a white person seeking to go for a walk with a Black person, disclosed the importance and possibility of shared intentions for a shared action to emerge despite vastly different stocks of racialized life experience.

In this sense, my epistemic position as a white person trying—and mostly failing—to understand the everyday experience of Black people in a place overwhelmingly shaped by racial inequality turned out to be an asset: It helped that I was white to feel, so to say, the difference: the difference between “outside” and “inside” context, between interpersonal and interracial (dis)trust, and between understanding and misunderstanding that came in sight only as I began to move back and forth between them.

5.6.4 Meeting of minds

The act of partaking is always at risk of being undermined by misunderstanding. In anthropology, where participation is meant to produce epistemic benefit, this risk affects the certainty of the discipline's knowledge production. The problem of misunderstanding is twofold: First, it poses a risk of improper generalization; second, it is a problem of certainty regarding the intentions and general mindset of others.

Taking seriously both problems, I want to stress that I do not claim interpretative sovereignty over the encounters I portray here, nor that I fully understand the guiding principles of my walking companions' lives. Whether my elaborations on the everyday life of Black people in post-apartheid South Africa are distortions; whether I have picked out its relevant features; and whether I am guilty of confining myself to a narrow diet of examples—whichever way I choose to hop, slide or dribble from the particular to the general: Galilean, Aristotelian and “Wittgensteinian” forms of idealization can only be identified by measuring them against their de-idealized actualizations. The plausibility of the here-offered account will at least partially depend on the coherence of the story I ended up telling, and its correlation with competing narratives. But coherence, we might object, is itself an ideal constantly pushing for smoothing over whatever does not fit into the picture of the overall chosen narrative.

To this end, I have suggested in chapter 3 that one of the main challenges in using Participant Observation as a research method is to learn when and how to switch from a particular mode of experience to general mode of analysis. In Participant Observation, the task of transcending the uniqueness of a moment without denying it becomes a context-bound endeavor itself. This is to say, the specific contextual fabric of a shared action, the failure or the success of recognizing and sharing the intention that guides it, will co-determine whether generalization is illuminating or distortive. It is the anthropologist's responsibility to critically and openly reflect on her own partialities. In this, ideally, she will lay open the degree of her certainty concerning her intentional “meeting of minds” with others.

I have mentioned in chapter 2 the individualist, reductive quest for what can be called “rock bottom explanations” present in the causal view. No doubt that it *would* be useful to unmistakably know what research partners are thinking as they perform the actions we are eager to contextualize and understand. The question is whether our interpretations are somehow deficient, or unscientific, in the absence of this certainty. I think they do not have to be. Retracing my own doubts about whether I was successfully sharing into *anything*, I sought to portray, rather than explain, how the tension emerging in the gap between together- and apart-ness in the manifold, everyday encounters in Makhanda is fruitful ground for a movement towards understanding.

As many aspects of social encounters portrayed in ethnographies also occur in social settings not situated in fieldwork, but in ordinary everyday life, Participant Observation highlights problems for philosophy of action and can help to carve out conditions which should be included in a theory of shared action that aims to be exegetical in, but also outside of philosophy. For of course, as Das, Jackson, Kleinman, and Singh point out, “the dilemma of other minds is not restricted to ethnographic knowing, but in many instances it is no different from the doubts that besiege us in everyday life” (2014: 24). These doubts, I have tried to show, should not be seen as crippling obstacles, but as motivating challenges and invitations to learn. My interpretations can be linked up, measured against and revised according to narratives to come. In this, at the very least, possible misunderstandings could reveal conditions of understanding.

5.6.5 Real ideals

An anthropological definition for participation should be demanding. In this, philosophical ideals of participation turned out to be helpful goalposts.

Philosophical investigations of the concept of participation aim at a universal understanding of the phenomenon. Philosophical inquiry seeks to provide sufficient and necessary conditions for what it means to do something together. Meanwhile, anthropologists in the field seek to produce ethnographic knowledge from specific, possibly idiosyncratic occurrences of participation. The two foci—one on general concepts *of*, the other on findings *through* participation—turn out to be complementary: In order to join in an action in a specific social setting, one has to have some sort of concept of what it is to participate, entailing conditions that need to be met to claim an action to be truly shared. At the same time, an idealized notion of a shared intentional action cannot be thought independently from its concrete occurrence.

I have discussed in chapter 3 that an ideal of walking, and by extension of walking together, is always dependent on numerous culturally shaped ideals—like how to ideally experience nature, oneself, or God, but also how to best spend time, appear in public, and so forth. In this way, every practice is deeply embedded in its own social context of ideals. Philosophical theories that use so-called paradigm examples, I have suggested, presuppose this context. As we can add now, they also, by means of presupposing, *shape* specific ideals with thought experiments crafted to function as universal intuition pumps. By discussing ideal forms of a certain type of action—with the goal of getting to an ideal notion of something more general, namely the nature of participation—, such theories also form the discourse of what a specific shared action can and cannot be.

In the social setting of Makhanda, the idea of a white university lecturer and a Black fruit seller walking together was confined to having the instrumental value of a business relationship. Zinzi and I were not perceived as friends by the broad public, but frequently

reminded that we were either unable or not supposed to have a friendship of any sorts. Nobody ever insinuated having ascribed a we-thought to us. Walking together, the way Gilbert frames it, was an ideal beyond our reach. Not because Gilbert's conditions are themselves unrealistic or flawed, but because the local discourse did not include the possibility of us walking the way Jack and Sue can. We were, collectively, perceived as too different. In this way, both academic and everyday discourse shape the ideals we have of things, actions, and relationships. The dominance of such discourses, I have sought to show, should be taken seriously by both philosophers of action and anthropologists as shaping factors not only of how we describe the social world, but what the world can be.

5.6.6 Perils and potential of participation

The purpose of this thesis was to show, empirically, methodologically, and theoretically, why participation as a challenging form of empirical research is worthwhile. Thinking through a set of epistemic preconditions of Participant Observation, I have explored how disrupting habits is an essential component of empirical knowledge gain. I have sought to show how non-propositional, perceptual knowledge slowly builds through steady trials and errors of Participant Observation as a research method. Doing things together, I have argued, *generates* shared attention and thus overlapping perspectives. Participation mediates non-propositional knowledge and enables contextual understanding of other peoples' lifeworlds. It turned out that walking together is a superior mode of Participant Observation. A walking perspective opens up a shared perceptual field, but also access to the bodily dimension of people's everyday life, and in my case, everyday suffering, vulnerability, and resistance. In addition, the openness and variability of the shared practice embraces the contingency and unpredictability of fieldwork as a fundamental factor of sociality.

The challenges Participant Observation faces, I would like to suggest, can be seen as dots on a triangle that defines the borders of anthropology. They propose ways to enter the disciplinary field and present questions we must frequently ask ourselves as anthropologists. The tension between the particular and the general produces the question how to turn anecdotes into testimonial evidence, transcending unique encounters, and harvesting scientifically relevant and sound anthropological knowledge. The challenge of context-dependence of action perception presses us to ask how much, and what kind of context is sufficient to interpret specific practices. Finally, the challenge of non-propositional knowledge produced the question of how to put our tacit, perceptual knowledge into words. I have provided empirical (chapters 4 and 5), methodological (chapters 1, 3, and 5) and theoretical (chapters 2 and 5) avenues for answering these questions.

The subtitle of this project begins with *Perils of Participation*. In ordinary language use, a peril is, mainly, a danger or a risk. I have asked the reader to keep in mind that what may seem at first to be challenging dark spots of the anthropological method may yet turn out not to be *problems* at all. I would like to evoke the original Latin meaning of the term, *periculum*, which is not just ‘danger’ or ‘risk’, but also means *attempt, experiment, or trial*. Revisiting this ideal of an experimental, inductive approach, let us return once more to Geertz’s claim that one of the advantages of anthropology as a scholarly enterprise is that its practitioners do not quite know exactly what it is. Geertz framed what could be a problem as a virtue. Accordingly, the uncertainties with which we have to deal when we work empirically should be seen as a genuine openness to the possibilities of interpretation yet to be discovered.

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