

References

- Adams, Laura L. 2010. *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Airriess, Christopher, Michael Hawkins, and Elizabeth Vaughan. 2012. "Situating Banal Nationalism, the Culture Wars, and Civil Religion: Governing Localized Geographies of National Identity in Indiana." *Social and Cultural Geography* 13 (1): 49-67.
- Albrecht, Holger. 2008. "The Nature of Political Participation." In *Political Participation under Authoritarianism in the Middle East*, edited by Ellen Lust-Okar and Saloua Zerhouni. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 15-32.
- Guoguang Wu. 2011. "Politics Against Science: Reflections on the Study of Chinese Politics in Contemporary China." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16, no. 3 (September): 279-97.
- He, Baogang. 2011. "The Dilemmas of China's Political Science in the Context of the Rise of China." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16, no. 3 (September): 257-77.
- Kapiszewski, Diana, Lauren M. Maclean, and Benjamin L. Read. 2015. *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Locke, Richard M. and Kathleen Thelen. 1995. "Apples and Oranges Revisited: Contextualized Comparisons and the Study of Comparative Labor Politics." *Politics and Society* 23, no. 3 (September): 337-67.
- Makley, Charlene. 2015. "The Sociopolitical Lives of Dead Bodies: Tibetan Self-Immolation Protest as Mass Media." *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (August): 448-476.
- Rabinow, Paul. 2007. *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Scott, James. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Schatzberg, Michael. 2001. *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine. 2014. "Judging Quality." In *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, 2nd ed., edited by Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, 120-46. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
- Shokeid, Moshe. 1997. "Negotiating Multiple Viewpoints: The Cook, the Native, the Publisher, and the Ethnographic Text." *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 4 (August-October): 631-45.

Member-Checking: Lessons from the Dead

Nicholas Rush Smith

City University of New York – City College

I sat back in the faded red chair, happy to see Bhuti for the first time in more than a year.¹ We exchanged the usual pleasantries. He asked about my wife. I asked about how the *majita* (wise guys) were doing. Bhuti named three young men who had died since the last time we had seen each other. The only name I knew was of an informal mechanic and alleged sometime car hijacker with whom I had a dispute several years earlier about repairs he performed on a car I owned. When I asked Bhuti what had happened, he replied, "He was sick"—a semantically-vague yet commonly-used code for HIV (Personal comm. recorded in field notes, December 23, 2016). I grunted an affirmation.

Bhuti then, excitedly, mentioned a fourth name—Vernon—because he had only died a few days earlier.

When I looked at him quizzically, Bhuti said that Vernon was a local drug dealer and insisted I knew him. I had encountered several such men during the roughly twenty months I had spent researching crime, policing, and vigilantism in South Africa. In this case, I could vaguely place Vernon's name but couldn't remember having met him. Bhuti sprang from the couch, walked into the adjacent kitchen, and returned with a local paper specializing in news from Durban's million-strong Indian community. Staring at me from the page was the placid face of an Indian man who looked just a few years younger than me. I didn't recognize him but quickly read through the story.

The newspaper reported that Vernon was shot nine times while sitting in his car a few streets away from where

¹ Except when referring to events or individuals described in publicly available sources, names are pseudonyms to provide anonymity to research subjects.

I was sitting reading about his death (see Somduth 2016 for an account). Two children (one of whom was his own) were in the back seat and were also hit by the gunfire. The story reported that no arrests had been made, although the police were treating it as a gang-related homicide, as Vernon was reportedly a well-known drug dealer.² I would eventually find a video purporting to be the killing online (South Africa Today 2016). Grainy, noiseless, and in black and white, it showed two men approaching a car nonchalantly, firing repeatedly into the driver side window, getting into a waiting vehicle, and driving away.

I open with this vignette not to shock but for the opposite reason: the conversation was fairly unremarkable in context. During my fieldwork, I have met many young men who are no longer living. Indeed, each subsequent return to my sometime home in Durban feels increasingly unhomey because many people I knew have passed, even as their presence still haunts conversations. My fieldwork in South Africa had been spread out over nearly a decade by the time I was reading about Vernon's death, so it is unsurprising that some of the older people I encountered in my fieldwork had passed. The volume of younger people, though, is striking from a middle-class American perspective. I cannot calculate how many interlocutors have died in that time, as I have lost touch with many acquaintances over the years. More viscerally, though, when I return to the field, many reintroductions start, as my conversation with Bhuti did, by talking about those who have died in the preceding months or years. This is never a purposeful conversation starter on my part. Rather, it is often an outcome of asking otherwise anodyne questions friends use to catch up with one another. We typically share news of change, and change in some of my circles can involve death.

This may seem like a mordant fascination that plays up hackneyed tropes about disease and dying in Africa.³ To be clear, my goal is not to reduce the extraordinary complexity of life in South Africa merely to the experience of death. Rather, I am asking from the vantage of a place where death intrudes regularly into the text of daily social life, how fieldworkers can write about one of the few universal human experiences. To put it differently, death's universality raises a set of universal challenges for fieldworkers, even as South Africa's high mortality rate shows the abhorrent ways in which death is experienced unequally across lines of race, class, and nationality.⁴ To

that end, in what follows, I raise two issues that have emerged from my research in South Africa over the years. First, I discuss challenges that come with trying to answer seemingly factual questions about death. Second, I raise ethical questions about how to write about those who have died, since the dead cannot speak for themselves or challenge how they are represented.

Two lessons emerge from these concerns for the practice of member-checking. First, attention to the politics of death suggests the need to think beyond the practice of verifying facts or confirming whether one's interpretation of an event is "correct" when member-checking. Instead, I suggest that attention to disputes about facts might sometimes be more revealing of local politics than the facts themselves. Second, I advocate for representing those who have died—even those who performed deeds in life that a researcher may find troubling—with critical empathy because the dead cannot speak for themselves. As I argue below, this does not mean agreeing with how one lived. But, by writing about someone's life within a thick context, it may help us understand why they lived as they did.

The Facts of Death

At first glance, death may seem to be about as fact-laden a social experience as there is. Partially, as a hackneyed joke laments, this is because death is as certain as taxes. And, as with taxation, death has been a constant concern of states over time. Indeed, scholars have shown that governing death was a major factor in the birth of modern states as nascent institutions tried to become sovereign over death, whether through the imposition of quarantines to regulate state-destroying plagues (McNeil 1976) or through the imposition of a justice system to regulate homicide (Lockwood 2017). The political necessity of governing death was eventually matched by a profusion of facts about death. Mortality rates, epidemiological statistics, homicide counts—all are measures of states' obsession with counting death and of the political importance in doing so, much like states obsess about collecting data for taxation.

Given the political importance of death-related data, the facts of death might seem to be a logical place for a fieldworker examining the politics of death and dying to look first. During fieldwork, however, I have found that the facts surrounding death may be in dispute, and the

² He had admitted as much in a court filing prior to his death as part of an application to interdict the police from arresting him (Govender 2015).

³ See Wainaina 2006.

⁴ Although they have thankfully decreased over the last decade as the South African government has rolled out anti-retroviral medications to combat the HIV epidemic, the country's mortality rates are exceptionally high and are at higher levels than when the country democratized in 1994. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.AMRT.MA?locations=ZA>.

terms of the dispute may reveal more about politics than about how someone died. Take perhaps the first question a researcher might want to answer: how did someone die? The question seems straightforward, but in practice can be complex. For example, as I have performed fieldwork with young men involved in various illegal industries, the reasons given for their deaths are often varied. The most common response to a question about how a young man died tends to be, “He was sick,” or on occasion to show three fingers, signaling South Africa’s “three-letter plague”: HIV (Steinberg 2011). With some frequency, the reason given is police violence (Smith 2019, 191-212). In other instances, violence by other young men is suggested. Sometimes suicide or a car accident is mentioned. At times, witchcraft may be rumored to have played a role in the death (e.g., Ashforth 2002).

Generally, though, the answers are inconclusive or contested. The reasons for death are often subject to rumor, gossip, or outright misinformation, responses that might seem at first glance like “useless” data given that such responses do not communicate valid “facts.” In reality, such “false” responses are deeply consequential for understanding local context and how one’s interlocutors see and navigate it (Fujii 2010).

For instance, during one fieldwork trip, I was standing with a group of neighbors on the street where I used to live on a Saturday afternoon. I could hear gunfire coming from down the hill. It wasn’t violent. Rather, it was a gunshot into the air—a typical “salute” for a fallen gangster at his funeral. I asked the guys who had died. They replied with the name of a locally notorious young man whom I didn’t know. I asked how he had died. This basic factual question provoked conflicting, although revealing, answers. Everyone “knew” that his death was the consequence of a botched home invasion in a wealthy suburb. The question was *who* killed him. One of the young men claimed it was the homeowner himself, telling us that the owner had pulled a gun and surprised the gangsters as they were trying to sneak up on him as he got out of his car. His “evidence” was that he had seen a video of the young man’s death on someone’s cell phone. “You can really see the power of the gun” in the video, he said, before exaggeratedly acting out how the young man’s body flew backwards, as if in an action movie (Jabulani, pers. comm. recorded in field notes, August 15, 2015). The other men looked dubious and I pulled out my phone in an unsuccessful bid to find the video on YouTube, as such footage is sometimes posted online. Another interlocutor who knew the deceased particularly well contradicted the initial account, saying

instead he had died during a shootout with the police as he tried to escape the scene of the crime.

Later, in thinking through the conflicting answers, I decided that trying to ascertain the facts of how this young man died was unlikely to lead to a conclusive answer. Still, the different accounts were significant for understanding the relationship these young men have to their own lives, to their class positions, to their places in South Africa’s post-apartheid racial order, and in their relationships to the state itself vis-à-vis the police. In other words, the lack of clarity about the facts—the debate about the facts and how young men engaged one another—was important “data.”

There are several different possibilities for interpreting the dispute about this young man’s death which shed light on member-checking. One is that when people tell conflicting stories like this, particularly if one version of the story seems improbable (as most of the young men seemed to think of the account of the homeowner shooting), it may be because people are telling stories that “work, that convey ideas or points” (White 2000, 30). That is, in a dispute or argument a “false” story may convey something “true” about the subject under dispute. One way to read the dispute about whether it was a homeowner or the police that shot this young man, for instance, would be that the disputants are conveying different facts about the dangers that young men of color face in South Africa’s primarily white suburbs and the ability of both private citizens and the police to kill.

Silences or omissions in stories can be similarly important (Fujii 2010). What was unsaid, but universally understood in this conversation, for instance, was that nothing would happen judicially related to this young man’s death, regardless of who actually killed him. And, if the young man had been killed by police, the silence about the probable lack of judicial attention suggested a distant and uncaring state that had little regard for the lives of young black men. For the man who suggested the gangster had been killed by police, for instance, I took his account as evidence that he viewed the state as murderous, given that I had discussed this individual’s sense of vulnerability in the face of police several times previously and as we had been discussing a controversial and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to prosecute police officers for allegedly illegal killings. Indeed, I had heard similar accounts so many times over the years working in this neighborhood that I had come to realize that for many young men, rather than the state appearing as a protection racket (Tilly 1985), they saw the state as something akin to a large-scale vigilante group that had

little interest in protecting them (even in a double-edged sense) because it was focused on killing them instead (Smith 2019).

The more general methodological point is that trying to ascertain the “true” facts may obscure other types of “truth” that are more readily available to a fieldworker, and more revealing of local politics, but are nonetheless resistant to checking the facts of an account. Trying to determine the facts of death through a process of member-checking to the exclusion of understanding competing “facts” may have the unfortunate consequence for a fieldworker of ignoring the “truths” that disputes, falsehoods, rumors, lies, and silences might reveal about the facts of life as one’s interlocutors experience them (Fujii 2010). To take these multiple “truths” into account, one might think of the process of member-checking less as a process of determining the final truth of an event and more as a process of accounting for the multiple understandings interlocutors hold of an event and what those multiple understandings reveal about how interlocutors understand and navigate their political worlds.

Condemning the Already Dead

Checking the facts of death are not the only issues surrounding work on death and member-checking, though; the ethics of studying death are also fraught, given that one is unable to “check” with someone who has died. Where engaging in member-checking with living informants affords them agency to clarify or revise their thoughts at a later date, the dead have no such power, even as they may live on in field notes, interview recordings, head notes, or published work.

This ethical dilemma is particularly fraught when it comes to writing of the dead because of two broadly held, albeit opposed, ethical approaches to representing those who have died. Many have a commonsense that one should not “speak ill of the dead,” an ethical imperative rooted in the recognition that the dead cannot speak for themselves. Others maintain that the consequences of our actions may outlive us, which requires factual accounts of the dead even if those facts are unflattering as they may provide moral lessons for the living. How can a researcher navigate these two contrasting ethical imperatives?

To address this question, I would like to return to Vernon, whom we met above. Reactions to Vernon’s killing broke across these two ethical poles. His sister, for instance, denied to the press that he was a drug dealer, insisting: “My brother was a successful person. He

ran a successful taxi business and owned a sports bar” (Somduth 2016). She went on to cite how he had just spent R50000 (about \$4000 at the time) to buy groceries to distribute to community members as a Christmastime charitable act. Not all public remembrances were so glowing. About a year and a half after he was gunned down, for instance, a local columnist cited Vernon as a prime example of why “We Should Stop the False Praise for the Deceased” (as his headline put it) (Devin 2018). As the columnist wrote, when Vernon was killed “the media was justified in denouncing him. After all, he will be most remembered for destroying lives through the sale of drugs. You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. If you are bad, then you are bad” (Devin 2018). For the columnist, making it apparent that some people are bad is crucial because how we understand the dead impacts how we see our own lives: “It is important to state factually the deceased’s strengths and weaknesses; one can learn wonderful lessons from both... Remember that death does not erase bad acts. If you want people to say good things about you when you are gone, do only good things when you are alive.” This ethical imperative emerges from a basic fact: our actions have consequences even after we are gone. Quoting Shakespeare, he writes, “The evil that men do lives after them. The good is oft interred with their bones” (Devin 2018).

Both positions here—what might be called the reverent position and the factual position—present an essentially binary view of our representational obligations to the dead. On the one side, Vernon’s sister refuses to acknowledge his alleged crimes, focusing only on the public services he performed. On the other side, for the columnist, Vernon was nothing more than a “scoundrel” (Devin 2018). A binary representation of the world, though, is not typically useful for subtle works of social science, given that the goal is typically understanding, rather than judgement.

To break free from this representational binary, I propose an alternative goal for representing those who have died: depicting their lives with critical empathy. By critical empathy, I mean trying to understand the actions one took in life in the context within which one lived, while also approaching those actions, the context, and one’s own emotional reactions to the person with reflective distance. Approaching those who have died with critical empathy does not mean blindly celebrating them or ignoring misdeeds. Nor does it mean trying to represent their lives in a straightforwardly factual way, as any representation already assumes one has selected certain facts to represent their lives to the inherent

exclusion of others. Instead, the goal of critically empathizing with the dead is understanding.

How can one achieve this goal? One approach for viewing the dead with critical empathy would be for the researcher to “thicken” the context in which they lived to help readers understand the complex social world the deceased navigated. This might involve approaching the dead with an “ethnographic sensibility”—seeing through the eyes of another, to the extent possible, to understand how they lived in the world and why they did so in a particular manner (Pader 2006). By placing the dead within a thick social and political world and trying to understand how they navigated it, one may be able to avoid the Scylla of celebratory depiction and the Charybdis of a “fact-based” moral accounting, while giving readers a sense of the complex and often contradictory worlds our interlocutors inhabit. In this sense, starting with a sense of critical empathy can help us understand context, which can aid in explicating actions.

Of course, empathizing with the dead is not without its own ethical dilemmas. It may be difficult to empathize with someone like Vernon who was allegedly responsible for much pain while he was living (see e.g., Blee 1993, 1998; Gallagher 2009). The difficulties of empathizing with someone whose acts a researcher may morally reject also presents representational, inferential, and interpretive dilemmas, as barriers to empathy may affect how we present others (Shesterinina 2019)—a dilemma that is compounded when the deceased are unable to respond for themselves. In such circumstances, “emotional reflexivity,” (Shesterinina 2019), in which one constantly checks one’s own responses toward the research subject, is particularly important for making sure that one’s writing does justice to the frequently multiple,

sometimes shifting roles subjects inhabited in their lives—in Vernon’s case, an alleged drug dealer who was also a brother and father. Such reflexivity can help create space for critical reflection on one’s interlocutors and the actions they took within the contexts they navigated to help us provide broader insights from particular cases.

After all, as we saw with the reactions to Vernon’s murder, death is often a polarizing, stocktaking moment. This places a particular ethical burden on the researcher because the researcher may act—intentionally or not—as an arbiter of the “truth” of the deceased’s life. In this regard, it is important for authors to remember that understanding one’s life does not necessarily mean agreement with how someone lived it. Yet, given that the dead cannot speak for themselves, a scholar speaks for them. This places a responsibility on the writer to seek empathy and to provide as richly realized a portrait as possible of the world in which they lived and in which they made choices, even as those choices may have been discomfoting.

In this sense, death presents an ethical dilemma for a researcher, particularly since member-checking with the deceased is not possible. Verifying facts about a deceased person’s life or checking the veracity of claims they made while alive is impossible through a process of member-checking. Even more, to write about someone who has passed away is to recognize that one has a certain power over their life because one has the power to represent them to the world.⁵ And, it is precisely because the dead cannot speak for themselves during a process of member-checking that the ethical burdens on a researcher are increased, giving extra responsibility for illuminating the context in which that person lived and to be reflexive when doing so.

References

- Ashforth, Adam. 2002. “An Epidemic of Witchcraft? The Implications of AIDS for the Post-Apartheid State.” *African Studies* 61, no. 1 (June): 121–43.
- Blee, Kathleen M. 1993. “Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan.” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 2 (September): 596–606.
- . 1998. “White-Knuckle Research: Emotional Dynamics in Fieldwork with Racist Activists.” *Qualitative Sociology* 21, no. 4 (December): 381–399.

⁵ As historians have written when encountering the dead in archives, this relationship also rests on a certain intimacy, even if one has never met the person one writes about (see, e.g., Farge 2013).

- Devin, Yogin. 2018. "We Should Stop the False Praise for the Deceased." *The Post*, April 12, 2018. <https://www.iol.co.za/the-post/we-should-stop-the-false-praise-for-the-deceased-14391962>.
- Farge, Arlette. 2013. *The Allure of the Archives*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Fujii, Lee Ann. 2010. "Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence." *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (March): 231–41.
- Gallagher, Carolyn. 2009. "Researching Repellent Groups: Some Methodological Considerations on How to Represent Militants, Radicals, and Other Belligerents." In *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*, edited by Chandra Lekha Sriram, John C. King, Julie A. Mertus, Olga Martin-Ortega, and Johanna Herman, 127–146. New York: Routledge.
- Govender, Logan. 2015. "Phoenix 'Drug Turf War' in the Spotlight." *The Post*, May 6, 2015. <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/post/20150506/281586649158799>.
- Lockwood, Matthew. 2017. *The Conquest of Death: Violence and the Birth of the Modern English State*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- McNeill, William H. 1976. *Plagues and Peoples*. New York: Anchor.
- Pader, Ellen. 2006. "Seeing with an Ethnographic Sensibility." In *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, edited by Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, 161–175. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
- Shesterinina, Anastasia. 2019. "Ethics, Empathy and Fear in Research on Violent Conflict." *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 2 (March): 190–202.
- Smith, Nicholas Rush. 2019. *Contradictions of Democracy: Vigilantism and Rights in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Somduth, Charlene. 2016. "Kids in the Firing Line." *The Post*, December 21–25, 2016. <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/post/20161221>.
- South Africa Today*. 2016. "Durban Father Shot Nine Times While Out with Kids." December 24, 2016. <https://southafricatoday.net/media/south-africa-video/crime-videos/durban-father-shot-nine-times-while-out-with-kids-video/>
- Statistics South Africa. 2018. "Mortality and Causes of Death in South Africa, 2016: Findings from Death Notification." Statistical Release P0309.3. Last modified March 27, 2018. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P03093/P030932016.pdf>.
- Steinberg, Jonny. 2011. *Three Letter Plague: A Young Man's Journey Through a Great Epidemic*. New York: Random House.
- Tilly, Charles. 1985. "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime." In *Bringing the State Back In*, edited by Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, 169–191. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wainaina, Binyavanga. 2006. "How to Write about Africa." *Granta Magazine*, January 19, 2006. <https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>.
- White, Luise. 2000. *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.