



Fenced off: Suspicion and the city as an exclusive space in post-Apartheid, suburban Cape Town

On the 4th of September 2015, four uniformed members of the South African Police Service (SAPS) kicked a man who was lying on the pavement after he had dropped his pistol and was unarmed. Still, the police officers fatally shot him at close range¹. The armed man was identified as a criminal suspect and had allegedly attempted a robbery. After he was defenceless on the ground with no considerable risk emanating from him in the presence of the police officers, the violence against the man took on a different meaning, hinting at the complex and embodied associations attached to danger and crime in South Africa. The incident is reminiscent of the bitter aftertastes souring public palates after a series

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of cases of police brutality in the recent past. During what has come to be known as the Marikana Massacre, 34 mine workers were shot dead by the SAPS on the 25-year anniversary of a nation-wide miner's strike in 2012. The dreadful event has become synonymous with the difficult relationships between civilians and the very institution that is meant to distribute a sense of security amongst them.

The pervasiveness of such incidents and memorability of consequent

aftertastes also become evident in a report by the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (Ipid)², showing that 57 per cent of deaths resulting from police action are due to police brutality. Members of the SAPS were also found to have been involved in 51 rape incidents, 61 torture incidents, 66 corruption cases and 159 other criminal cases in 2017. New events of police brutality captured on camera can be found on Youtube under captions such as 'police brutality hits again'. It is clear that they cannot be interpreted as isolated occurrences. The SAPS reportedly being twice as deadly as their North American counterparts must also be interpreted against the fact that they are six times more likely to die

on duty in comparison. While this likelihood is noteworthy and may lead to more violent reactions in unwarranted cases to protect their own lives, it does not account for the reported cases of rape, torture and corruption in 2017.

A lack of faith in the ability of the state to offer protection to its citizens is evidenced in South Africa being the fourth largest private security industry in the world with a large part of it being consumer driven³ and exceeding spending on both, the country's police and army⁴. Even though private security is a costly investment, security guards are only paid between R3000-5000 (approximately \$145-360) per month. As this additional contribution to safety is often still not deemed to be sufficient, local Neighbourhood Watch groups consisting of ordinary citizens are not unusual, especially in the more affluent South African suburbs. All these responses to anxious fears about 'crime waves' in South Africa (Comaroff & Comaroff 2006), often believed to originate from the economically fragile outskirts of the cosy city cores (Seekings 1996), ought to stir questions of societal trust, spatial divisions and the ways in which suspicion is encountered on an individual and social level. Constructions of fear and danger play important roles in invoking support for harsh criminal justice strategies (Douglas 1992). Suspicion also becomes processed and embodied in specific ways that are as academically intriguing as they are socially challenging.

Neighbourhood Watch groups as spaces of agency

The trust in state institutions to protect that John Locke (1967) once described as essential for the sharing of a social space is corrupted in South Africa. Instead, suspicion

and fear form a dangerous social symbiosis in that they create a deep-seated notion of instability and vulnerability. Formations of Neighbourhood Watch groups, often adding to private security personnel in protecting the wealthier urban spheres, constitutes one way in which perceived vulnerability manifests. Agency and confidence are fostered through strategies of security such as patrolling the streets and reporting back to neighbours about what is identified as 'suspicious behaviour'. Neighbourhood Watch groups provide an ample ethnographic context to interrogate how notions of being unsafe and vulnerable become embodied. In 2015, I spent ten months with the Neighbourhood Watch group in Observatory, a suburb south of the city centre of the colonial 'mother city' Cape Town and its signature mountain. The area is particular in that it is considered to be bohemian and liberal. It was a 'grey area' during the legally segregating Apartheid years as it accommodated differently racially classified people. When private and supposedly 'high class' protection services were judged to have failed in their efforts to protect, alternative networks of security and trust were revived in Observatory. The local Neighbourhood Watch as an organisation emerged, seeking to decrease perceived vulnerability through strategic practices such as patrolling local streets. In the process of revival, the ideological foundations of the organisation were passionately discussed in meetings and via email and chat groups, with many wanting to move away from the common understanding of such groups as inherently conservative and racially dividing.

The responsibility to protect from those who commit crimes (and to penalise them) has ultimately

been given to civilians. The case study revealed that neighbourhood formations, with the aim to combat crime, constitute spaces in which precarity, that is insufficient security of a person's physical well-being provided by the state and other societal structures (Butler 2016), is fuelled by a fear of crime while being negotiated through the idea of relationality (Butler 2012) and an increased notion of agency. In the process of re-claiming the local streets and via the different forums of social interaction for group members (chat groups, committee meetings and patrols), a particular idea of 'the suspect' or 'criminal other' (Brown 1995), seen as a constant threat to one's well-being, can be observed to impact embodied ways of moving through the communal space. It also manifests in performances (the role of 'the patroller' as a conceptual counterpart to the phantom 'suspect'), concrete protective strategies of navigating the area, and the spatial channelling of bodies that are conceptualised as not belonging. The effectively excluded are usually people of colour whose bodies have been weathered by poverty. As a social space, the Neighbourhood Watch groups offer a way for people to live through uncertainty by forging relationships of trust, based on the imagination of a particular kind of 'suspect' and the cultivation of suspicion.

Couch patrolling and recycling crime

Houses and communities are often equipped with various security technologies in suburban Cape Town. Private security guards are dotting the streets where people can afford to hire them. These strategic acts of fencing oneself off and the networking of communities in watching, finding

and penalising individuals classified by them as criminally 'suspicious' are drastic expressions of complicated societal relations that are intrinsically framed by feelings of social insecurity, vulnerability and a lack of trust. In the process, criminologies of the 'alien other', and representations of criminals as dangerous members of distinct racial and social groups who bear little resemblance to oneself (Garland 1996) mutate into an overpowering fear of crime (Pain 2008) and what I understand to be an ever present perceived 'air of violence'.

The air of violence becomes quite apparent when looking at the amount of money invested in fencing, wiring and equipping buildings, people and areas with appliances and accessories that are marketed as promoting safety (and that are largely taxed and thus highly profitable for the state when promoted and sold). However, security strategies do not always take the visible shape of security installations and Neighbourhood Watch patrollers in the streets with their bibs and two-way radios. In fact, while the Neighbourhood Watch in Observatory had a steadily increasing number of members at the time of my fieldwork, very few of them volunteered to patrol and actively watch the streets. More common was what one very active group member coined as 'couch patrolling', implying that many members merely rely on new media technologies such as WhatsApp⁵ chat groups while only sharing observations made from their bedroom windows themselves.

Through a constant sharing of crime stories and pictures of 'suspects' on these media platforms, fear becomes continuously perpetuated and recycled, effectively playing into the, for some, highly profitable social trend of wrapping

oneself in layers of security mechanisms. Discussions in the monthly Neighbourhood Watch meetings as well as in the online forums. I observed were lively and ideologically challenged the glossing over of poverty, race and crime. Nevertheless, recycled crime stories and snapshots of potential criminals reappearing via various channels also reaffirm the need for self-protection and group strength as a basis for the different Neighbourhood Watch members with conflicting opinions to relate to one another.

Cultivated suspicion

Neighbourhood Watch formations can be understood as urban renewal projects that return governance to the state (Jensen 2006). As a state ally, the groups co-produce a particular kind of social space. Fear and suspicion in this space features within different social platforms and does not only constitute something learned and performed, but also something affecting social relationships in different ways. Embodied suspicion has a considerable influence on communities, especially when readily and widely shared via communication technologies and through its visualisation in the form of pictures of 'suspects' that dominate local forums.

It is the intention of Neighbourhood Watch groups to dominate fears as a collective. However, the developing of strategies, as de Certeau (1984) notes, presumes control, is self-segregating and means setting oneself up as a barricaded insider. Using cultivated strategies and embodied and performed practices, patrolling the neighbourhood has a deep impact on what kinds of encounters become possible and on the degrees of humanness that become attributed to individuals.

Increased agency and confidence produced through relationality offer tools in navigating fears of crime. While this becomes frequently intellectually challenged, the practice of patrolling (in whichever form), belonging to the Neighbourhood Watch group and therefore feeling a little safer precludes the domination of others and binary constructions of 'suspects' as potential perpetrators and the likely innocent.

Human realities are always fabricated, invented, imagined and constructed and cultures are made or even 'made up' (Conquergood 1989). Practices of watching the neighbourhood and the cultivation of suspicion involved in the process reveal the ambiguities and enigmas of everyday practices. Cultural fabrications like the 'suspect' and 'patroller' hold the promise of reimagining and refashioning the world. In the interest of developing policies that may transform South Africa and its engrained practices of keeping its variety of social spaces and cultural *mélange* apart from one another, these performances or embodied routines relating to trust and distrust should be looked at more closely in different local contexts and beyond.

Notes

1. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/africa-police-filmed-shooting-unarmed-suspect-dead-151102192137128.html>.
2. http://pmg-assets.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/IPID_Annual_Reports_Annual_Reports_201617CD_File.pdf.
3. <http://www.702.co.za/articles/260253/sa-has-the-fourth-largest-private-security-industry-in-the-world-security-expert>.
4. <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/02/08/business/south-africa-private-security/>.



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