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White, middle-class South Africans moving through Cape Town: mobile encounters with strangers

Nick Schuermans¹²

1 Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research

Department of Geography

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Pleinlaan 2

B-1050 Brussels

Belgium

+3226293185

Nick.Schuermans@vub.ac.be

2. Centre on Inequalities, Poverty, Social Exclusion and the City

Department of Sociology

University of Antwerp

Sint-Jacobstraat 2

B-2000 Antwerpen

Belgium

+3232655135

Nick.Schuermans@uantwerpen.be

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Abstract Drawing on photo-elicitation interviews with 60 middle-class, white residents of two privileged suburbs of Cape Town, this paper focuses on the particularities and the potential effects of mobile encounters with strangers. Starting from discourses about different means of transportation, it is demonstrated, first, that middle-class, white South Africans prefer cars over public transit not only for safety reasons or matters of practicality but also to circumvent interactions with those whom they consider to be strangers. Yet, based on the ambiguous and ambivalent sensations of fear, shame, guilt, sympathy, apathy and anxiety provoked by glances and glimpses of strangers on drives through the city, it is clarified that particular forms of visual encounter which develop on-the-go can stimulate privileged residents of a very unequal city to develop new engagements with strangers. By analyzing how unfocused interactions through the windshield add up to focused interactions at home and at work, it is shown, more specifically, how different types of encounters at different places complement each other to encourage middle-class, white residents to see the humanity of those whom they had considered to be strange or dangerous before.

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Introduction

This article examines the lived experience of interactions with strangers as cultural others (cf. Simmel, 1908). By shifting attention toward the intimate scale of the body, I recognize that the figure of the stranger is not just pre-given on a macro level, but produced in embodied encounters with difference (Ahmed, 2000; Koefoed & Simonsen, 2011). Instead of disentangling the bodily traits and the social characteristics of strangers, I will pay attention to the social relationships which develop when strangers meet each other. Horgan (2012, p. 611) calls this strangership: 'just as friendship refers to the form of relation between friends, strangership refers to the form of relations between strangers'.

In modernity, strangership was often marked by violent modes of exclusion. In its quest for sameness and stability, the modern state projected fears and anxieties on strangers. To maintain ontological security, two different purification strategies were developed (Bauman, 1995; Sibley, 1988). The first one entails surveillance, discipline and integration. It is based on the conviction that strangers can be incorporated in the dominant social group. For Bauman (1995, p. 2), 'this was the strategy of assimilation – making the different similar, the smothering of cultural or linguistic distinctions'. The second one involves exile, expulsion and exclusion. It is based on the idea that encounters with abject strangers can be avoided through the enforcement of spatial boundaries and social control (Sibley, 1995). According to Bauman (1995, p. 2), 'this was the strategy of exclusion – (...) expelling the strangers beyond the frontiers of the managed and manageable territory'.

While much of the history of humankind can be read as a struggle between these two purification strategies, this paper aims to explore a more positive kind of strangership. Inspired by the emergence of a geographies of encounter literature (Valentine, 2008) and multidisciplinary research on commonplace diversity (Wessendorf, 2014) and everyday multiculture (Wise & Velayutham, 2009), I analyze how people learn to live together with strangers in everyday life. In this way, this paper is part a long lineage of work which characterizes cities as sites of connection, rather than division (e.g. Amin, 2012; Sennett, 1970; Young, 1990).

In essence, this article argues that insights from the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) can contribute to an in-depth understanding of the nature and potential effects of encounters with strangers. To substantiate this claim, I draw on photo-elicitation interviews with middle-class whites living in two privileged neighborhoods of Cape Town. Section 'Encounters ∞ South Africa' introduces the research context; Section 'Research ∞ encounters' presents my research methodology. First, Section 'Encounters ∞ mobilities' points at the place-bound perspective that runs through much scholarship on encounters in (super)diverse cities and the way in which mobilities studies can help us to overcome this.

Encounters ∞ mobilities

Studies on the geographies of encounter often identify two types of encounter in two kinds of places (Amin, 2012; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011; Winiarska, 2015). Drawing on the seminal work of Goffman (1963) and Lofland (1998), a distinction can be made between unfocused interactions in the public realm and focused interactions in the parochial realm. For Goffman (1963, p. 24), unfocused interactions occur 'when one gleans information about another person present by glancing at him, if only momentarily'. 'When persons gather close together and openly cooperate to sustain a single focus of attention', he speaks of focused interactions (Goffman, 1963, p. 24). In Lofland's (1998) understanding, most unfocused interactions take place in the public realm: the terrain of fleeting exchanges and short-lived encounters between people who remain strangers to each other. For her, focused interactions prevail in the parochial realm, characterized by communal relationships between neighbors, colleagues or acquaintances.

By using the term 'conviviality', many scholars indicate that encounters with strangers have become an ordinary feature of the public realm in many parts of the world and that racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural particularities do not necessarily pose an insuperable problem in unfocused interactions (Gilroy, 2006, p. 27; Neal, Bennett, Cochrane, & Mohan, 2013). Yet, while civility toward diversity (Wessendorf, 2014) and indifference to difference (Tonkiss, 2003) are clearly a step forward from the violent modes of exclusion that persisted throughout history, many scholars urge us not to overestimate the potential of unfocused interactions in streets, parks or squares. Based on research in the U.K., Valentine (2008) warns, for instance, that many white majority residents tend to behave in courteous ways toward strangers they meet on the street, but that deeper-lying stereotypes, prejudices, cultural norms and economic inequalities generally remain unaffected by such encounters. In like manner, a study in the Marzahn neighborhood of Berlin taught Matejskova and Leitner (2011) that short-lived encounters in public space are, at best, incidental encounters which comply with the norms of civility and, at worst, fleeting exchanges which harden negative stereotypes.

Hence, researchers working across a broad spectrum of disciplines argue that fundamental changes in the capacity to live with difference occur mostly through focused interactions in the parochial realm (Amin, 2002; Lawson & Elwood, 2014; Valentine, 2008; Winiarska, 2015). When strangers assume joint responsibility for their work, school or football club, the underlying logic goes, they learn to see each other as co-workers, co-learners or teammates and stop treating each other as strangers (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011; Wessendorf, 2014). Askins and Pain (2011) infer, for instance, that joint activities in community centers can counter racist and ethnocentric prejudices by stimulating regular co-operation between strangers. Amin (2002, p. 970) agrees that recurring engagement with strangers 'disrupts easy labeling of the stranger as enemy and initiates new attachments'.

Even though Simmel (1908) considered increased and accelerated mobility to be the driver behind the proliferation of strangers (Horgan, 2012; Jensen, 2009), few studies on

strangership adopt a truly mobile perspective. As such, the main claim of this paper is that an engagement with mobilities can help us to find out where, when and how encounters with strangers do have meaningful effects. More specifically, I aim to demonstrate two ways in which a cross-fertilization between the geographies of encounter literature and the mobilities turn is fruitful. In essence, the crux of my argument is that the full potential of encounters with strangers can only be revealed if one considers the full range of focused and unfocused interactions people experience throughout their mobile lives, together with the way in which interpersonal exchanges in the private, public and parochial realms add up to each other (cf. Leitner, 2012; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012).

My first argument relates to the types of encounter and the kinds of places under study. Because relatively immobile activities and bounded notions of place are currently being prioritized as the fundamental locus of human identity and experience (cf. Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 209), much of the current literature on strangership ignores focused and unfocused interactions between mobile strangers. This is a serious omission. If mobility practices produce meaning, identity and cultural signification, the figure of the stranger is also constituted by practicing mobility (Jensen, 2009, p. 140).

Building upon this argument, this article examines the particularities of encounters between mobile strangers. My main interest is not in focused and unfocused interactions within mobile spaces of public transportation (cf. Bissell, 2010; Wilson, 2011), but in observations of strange people, strange places or strange practices from the car. At first sight, this may seem odd. While journeys on foot, by bike or on public transit are often celebrated as key sites of social encounter, the car is generally said to insulate drivers and passengers from the social worlds they traverse (De Cauter, 2004; Thrift, 2004). And while buses, trams and trains are glorified as places of contact and conviviality, the automobile is generally treated as a quasi-private or even anti-social means of transportation (Henderson, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2000).

In the last decade, detailed studies have called into question such straightforward relations between automobility, privatization, insularization and capsularization, however. Merriman (2004) claims, for instance, that the popular notion of the highway as an archetypical non-place (in the meaning of Augé, 1992) underestimates the range of emotions and sensations drivers go through. Based on a rich geography of England's M1, he concludes that any characterization of the highway in terms of alienation 'overlooks the complex habitations, practices of dwelling, embodied relations, material presences, placings and hybrid subjectivities associated with movement through such spaces' (Merriman, 2004, p. 154). Drawing on an 'anthropology of traffic', Yazici (2013) adds that uncomfortable observations across lines of class and/or gender are commonplace in traffic jams in Istanbul. Recent ethnographical research confirms that banal practices of racialized and classed stereotyping can be both intensified and disrupted through observations from the car (Edensor, 2003; Swanton, 2010). In the same line of thought, my paper explores how the 'non-place' of the highway and the 'capsule' of the car enable particular geographies of encounter with strangers.

My second argument concerns the interrelations between different encounters at different places (cf. Kwan, 2013). In the words of Koefoed and Simonsen (2011, p. 346), every encounter 'presupposes other faces, other bodies, other spaces and other times as part of its frame'. For Amin (2012, p. 81), 'feelings formed in many other relational spaces invade the encounter, mediating the labour of inter-culture and recognition among proximate strangers'. Even though this mediation effect is widely acknowledged, most social and cultural geographers focus on interpersonal exchanges with strangers in relatively fixed and bounded places, such as neighborhoods, schools or community centers.

Through a consideration of the ways in which focused and unfocused interactions in different times, places and realms work together, this paper aims to go beyond such sedentarist thinking. In the words of Sheller and Urry (2006, p. 209), 'the mobilities paradigm (...) emphasizes that all places are tied into at least thin networks of connections that stretch beyond each such place and mean that nowhere can be an "island"'. By adopting a relational approach to places of encounter, it becomes possible to explain how the effects of both focused and unfocused interactions can be 'scaled up' beyond their spatial and temporal immediacy (cf. Valentine, 2008, p. 325). It also allows us to investigate how encounters in different places contradict and/or corroborate each other (cf. Hemming, 2011, p. 77). To facilitate this, I will consider the ways in which observations from the car relate to face-to-face encounters with strangers in other places and other times (cf. Schuermans, 2016b).

Encounters ∞ South Africa

As strangers come into being through historically and geographically specific practices of estrangement (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2011, p. 345), it is crucial to introduce my research context before delving into empirical findings. After all, both the position of the stranger and the practices of strangership in post-apartheid South Africa differ in many ways from those in the relatively small number of cities, predominantly in Western Europe, where most studies on encounters have been conducted so far.

First of all, it is essential that the South African figure of the stranger builds upon a long history of colonial rule and racial exclusion. While superdiversity and multiculturalism are relatively new features in Western Europe, proximity to strangers has been a feature of white life in South Africa for centuries. To deal with this proximity, an essentialist dichotomy between white and black, European and non-European, was established (Ballard, 2004a). Initially, this racial binary was based on biological and religious persuasions. With the advent of modernity and capitalism, whites were expected to be modern, civilized and advanced, while blacks were supposed to be traditional, barbaric and backward (Popke & Ballard, 2004). This difference was, then, used as a moral justification for a racist system of racial discrimination in which race and class terminology became virtually interchangeable (Steyn, 2001, p. 16).

According to Ballard (2004a) and Nahnsen (2006), the history of white supremacy in South Africa can be read as an interplay between the two purification strategies outlined in the introduction. While liberal Cape administrators were convinced that assimilationism was desirable – and achievable – for much of the nineteenth century, segregationism has clearly been the dominant strategy (Bickford-Smith, 1995). In apartheid years, the state planned homelands, satellite towns, townships and mono-racial residential zones in such a way that whites, coloreds, Indians and Black Africans did not have to cross each other's territories (Western, 1996). Racially divided seating arrangements, racially segregated places of boarding and racially distinctive transport routes enforced segregation on the move (Pirie, 1992). The result was an apartheid city in which interracial encounters were almost inhabited altogether (Nahnsen, 2006, p. 100). In the words of Mbembe (2007, p. 162), 'an opaque wall of ignorance had been erected [which] prevented any true sense of proximity, reciprocity or similarity'.

In the optimism that permeated South Africa in the beginning of the 1990s, the rainbow came to symbolize the imaginary nation that was to be constructed in the post-apartheid era (Baines, 1998). Yet, even before I conducted my fieldwork, back in 2007 and 2008, this initial enthusiasm had been tempered already. Despite the fact that a select group of Black Africans, Coloreds and Indians had managed to climb the social ladder, the then president Mbeki (2003) was mostly correct in saying that South Africa was still a country of two nations: one black and poor and another one white and prosperous. While many black South Africans were angry because the repeal of the discriminatory laws had not immediately helped them out of poverty, many white compatriots were anxious about their economic future in a country where poor whites had started to appear more regularly in the streets (Schuermans & Visser, 2005). Together with the desegregation of formerly exclusively white neighborhoods (Ballard, 2004b) and the informalization of the CBD's (Popke & Ballard, 2004), this was a sign that the master narrative of whiteness – and the figure of the black stranger on which it was based – had started to crumble (Steyn, 2001).

Nowadays, the urban landscape of Cape Town is still marked by high levels of segregation (Parry & van Eeden, 2015). In the higher income categories, the residential environment is characterized by gated communities (Lemanski, Landman, & Durlington, 2008), neighborhood watches (Schuermans & Spoeter, 2016) and private security companies (Paasche, Yarwood, & Sidaway, 2014). Outside the immediate living environment, white, middle-class people tend to limit their freedom of movement to shopping malls (Houssay-Holzschuch & Teppo, 2009), secured office complexes (Murray, 2011) and city improvement districts (Didier, Morange, & Peyroux, 2013).

Many scholars underline that the drive toward these enclaves is motivated not only by the high levels of crime but also by the white, middle-class desire to retreat in places where privileged socioeconomic positions and white identities are not challenged through uneasy encounters with strangers (Fu & Murray, 2014; Lemanski, 2004; Nahnsen, 2006). In their eyes, the walls, the fences, the cameras and the armed response operators should be seen not only as a response to the real risk of becoming the victim of crime but also as a spatial manifestation of the quest for a 'comfort zone' in which middle-class, white South Africans

can disengage from socioeconomic inequalities, cultural otherness and strangerhood at large (Ballard, 2004a).

Figure 1. The location of the case study neighborhoods, the informal settlements, the photographs and the other places mentioned in the photo elicitation interviews.

Against this background, the basic starting point of my PhD research was that middle-class, white South Africans may try to retreat to securitized islands of wealth and whiteness, but that they can never escape focused and unfocused interactions with the urban poor altogether (Schuermans, 2011). At home, many privileged South Africans employ Black African domestic workers (Dinkelman & Ranchhod, 2012). In many neighborhoods, they are confronted with homeless people, squatters and beggars (Ballard, 2004b). As much as one third of all visitors to an upmarket shopping mall such as the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront belong to the lowest income categories (Houssay-Holzschuch & Teppo, 2009, p. 371). On drives to the airport, they spot the corrugated metal, the discarded wood and the plastic sheets of the shacks lining the highway (Newton, 2009).

In this context, I wanted to find out what kind of focused and unfocused interactions across lines of race and class white middle-class South Africans do have across the city and what kind of effects such encounters can have. I was particularly interested in the way these encounters were influenced by fears and anxieties. While I have summarized the main findings of my research at the scale of the body (Schuermans, 2016a), the house (Schuermans, 2013) and the neighborhood (Schuermans & Spocter, 2016) elsewhere, I will focus, in this article, on mobile encounters with strangers across the city.

Research ∞ encounters

To answer my research questions, I conducted a total of 60 in-depth interviews with middle-class, white residents of two privileged neighborhoods of Cape Town. Whereas Tamboerskloof is a mostly English-speaking, gentrified neighborhood close to the central business district (TBK on Figure 1), Vredeskloof is a more Afrikaans-speaking, family-oriented neighborhood in the so-called Northern Suburbs (VDK on Figure 1). I also analyzed the content of community websites, email flashes, personal observations and interviews with 18 stakeholders. To increase the credibility of my analysis, I returned to Cape Town to conduct nine member checking interviews in 2008.¹

The interviews with residents lasted between 1 and 3 h and were conducted in the mother tongue of the respondents, either English or Afrikaans. The first part of each interview dealt with the neighborhood. I asked my interviewees about their motivation to move to the case study neighborhood, their sense of community and the way in which fear of crime had changed their do's and don'ts. I made sure that strategies to deal with squatters and homeless people were discussed in each interview (see Schuermans & Spouter, 2016). In the second part, I used about 15 different photographs of shopping malls, recreation facilities, roads and train stations all over the city (e.g. Figures 2–5). These pictures were selected in such a way that they would initiate conversations about different types of places in all corners of the city (see Figure 1 for a map with the locations of all photographs).²

This photo-elicitation technique turned out to be very effective in revealing the interactions between focused and unfocused interactions with strangers in different parts of the city. On the one hand, it was clear that the methodology generated much more information about interactions with strangers than the supplementary mental maps and space–time prisms I only gathered in the first interviews. While the (auto)ethnographic fieldwork deployed by Wilson (2011) and Yazici (2013) has the advantage that it looks at actual journeys and real encounters, many respondents considered it much easier to talk about recalled or imagined encounters on the basis of photographs than on the basis of maps or tables with out-of-home activities. On the other hand, it was obvious that the photographs evoked chains of association connecting different encounters in different parts of the city. While I had initially planned to inquire my interviewees whether they recognized the places on the photographs and what kind of experiences or thoughts they had about them, many of them started to talk about certain incidents, encounters and anxieties even before I had asked a single question. In fact, the photographs triggered not only memories of similar situations in comparable places but also discussions of completely different, but related experiences in distant parts of the city. In this way, the respondents indicated how interactions in a particular place were connected with encounters elsewhere. In contrast to the life story narratives gathered by Valentine and Sadgrove (2012), most discourses were limited to the urban scale.

In the two following sections, I will summarize my analysis of the interviews in NVivo. First, Section 'Avoiding encounters' draws on discourses about different means of public

transit to demonstrate that my respondents prefer cars not only for safety reasons or matters of practicality but also to circumvent confrontations with those whom they consider to be strangers. Yet, based on the ambiguous and ambivalent sensations of fear, shame, guilt, sympathy, apathy and anxiety provoked by observations from the N2 highway, Section 'Relational encounters' demonstrates that visible confrontations with poverty through the windshield can encourage privileged residents of a dramatically unequal city such as Cape Town to challenge their stereotypes and attitudes toward strangers. By analyzing how unfocused interactions on the highway are bound up with focused interactions at home and at work, I will show, in particular, how encounters in different places across the city can enrich each other. In the discussion and conclusion, I will draw on Ahmed's (2000, 2004) work on 'strange encounters' to discuss the nature and the potential effects of visual and relational encounters with strangers (cf. Schuermans, 2016a).

Figure 2. Cape Town central railway station.

Avoiding encounters

When I showed my respondents in Vredeloof and Tamboerskloof photographs of Cape Town's central railway station (Figure 2), most admitted that they preferred to avoid trains, buses or shared taxis because of fear of crime. The chance of becoming the victim of a robbery or mugging was said to be much higher if one mingled with strangers in packed buses, crammed trains or busy railway stations. Different sources indicated that this was not a fiction. The community police forum often declared the railway station to be one of the crime hotspots of central Cape Town. The local press also tended to describe the station deck as a 'hotbed for robbers'.

Nonetheless, it was evident that many real and imaginative encounters in public transit were shaped by common beliefs about the potential of certain groups to become criminals or victims of crime. Nearly all interviewees told me that they were much more

suspicious of unfamiliar blacks than of unknown whites. Most were also convinced that 'you're more visible if you're white' and that you're 'just more of an obvious target if [you're] the only white person around'. A police officer from Vredeloof told me that he knew that hundreds of security guards had been employed by the train operator, but that he had stopped commuting by train, nonetheless, because he felt unsafe and uncomfortable in the station being outnumbered as a white, middle-class person:

The station has changed completely. (...) It has become more of an African station. (...) You get that perception again of being a white man between many blacks or whatever. And I think that's the thing which makes you feel unsafe. (Man in his fifties, Vredeloof)

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that safety and security are not the only reasons why middle-class, white South Africans resort to their cars for even the shortest distances. While most respondents had little to no experience on public transit, they were not only afraid of crime, but also scared to feel out of place among a majority of black South Africans. In the two quotes below, the references to hunger and restaurants demonstrate that this feeling is influenced not only by their whiteness but also by their middle-class status. The references to personal space, physical closeness and touch show the embodied nature of the real and imagined encounters in shared taxis:

For me, to sit that physically close to another person would be very uncomfortable. I enjoy a certain amount of personal space. You know, in a restaurant, I would share a table with people, without problems, or move over. But I actually don't want to touch a stranger, for a period of time, during a journey for example. That would be my main reason why I wouldn't take a shared taxi somewhere. (Woman in her twenties, Tamboerskloof)

You know, even in Europe, I would not board a taxi with another passenger in it. (...) Maybe it's the idea that you don't know with whom you will ride together. Maybe it's a desperate man that had his last decent meal three weeks ago. (Woman in her forties, Tamboerskloof)

When the discourses of my respondents about different means of transportation are taken together, much of the pessimism in the international literature on automobility seems to be justified. Just like Butler and Hannam (2014, p. 18) conclude that cars play a significant role in reducing the exposure of expatriates in Kuala Lumpur to uncomfortable social encounters, white South Africans rely on automobility not only because it enables them to travel conveniently and safely through a sprawling city but also because it helps them to avoid physical contact with the bodies of poor strangers.

In fact, many white South Africans see their car as a 'capsule' (De Cauter, 2004) or 'privatized cocoon' (Swanton, 2010, p. 451) that fixes, hardens and enlarges the 'personal space' they try to establish around their bodies. By accepting certain people inside this cocoon, and by keeping others out, fearful people get the impression that they can manage the risk to

become victims of crime. By locking their doors and by rolling up their windows, they are able to avoid interactions with disadvantaged people in a way that buses, trains, bicycles or walks would never allow. Talking about interactions with street vendors at traffic lights (see Figure 3), the quote below confirms Henderson (2006, p. 301) contention that middle-class whites drive cars because it facilitates 'privatized, unhindered, cocooned movement through public space, whereby people feel they have a right not to be burdened through interaction with anyone or anything they wish to avoid':

I really hate it. They just don't stop. I don't get the feeling that they will steal something from me, but it feels like they are invading my privacy, you see? Here I am in my car. I don't bother anyone. (Woman in her forties, Vredeloof)

As the private cocoon of the car consists not only of metal but also of glass (Sheller & Urry, 2000, p. 747), the next section will investigate whether glances and glimpses of strangers on drives through the city can burst 'the opaque wall of ignorance' (Mbembe, 2007, p. 162) which characterizes much strangership in South Africa.

Figure 3. Street vendors on the N2 in Somerset West.

Relational encounters

Interested in the potential effects of observations through the windshield, I showed my respondents photographs of street vendors working at a traffic light in Somerset West (Figure 3), informal settlements next to the N2 (Figure 4) and people sitting next to the R300 (Figure 5). From the responses, it became clear that drives evoked many fears. Drivers were frightened to knock over pedestrians, scared of becoming the victim of a hijacking and, above all, afraid to pull over to the shoulder in case their car broke down:

I've had to stop next to the N2 already. Which was a terrible experience. It happened on a Saturday afternoon. About this time. Half past five. I came from Strand and my wheel broke down. I was standing next to the road where all the informal settlements are. And a few people who lived there walked to me. In any case, they were walking next to the road. They didn't come to me. But they came

to sit here on the wall and they were looking at me. And I am sitting here and I am getting hysterical. (Woman in her thirties, Vredekloof)

Figure 4. Informal settlements along the N2.

Figure 5. The R300.

While fear was the dominant emotion behind the steering wheel, it was certainly not the only one. The woman from the quote above, told me, for example, that she had not only been frightened, but that she had also been overwhelmed by the precarious circumstances in which fellow Capetonians were living. Especially when she used the N2 on a very rainy day, she felt sorry and ashamed for the fact that children in her city had to grow up under such circumstances (cf. Schuermans, 2016b). While some respondents indicated that they remained completely indifferent to such sights, others cherished the fact that a drive along the informal settlements and townships provided their only experience of such places. In Tamboerskloof, someone underlined that 'it is good to realize that not everyone is wealthy'. Other people confirmed that they had become more conscious of the huge gap between rich and poor South Africans by comparing their own living circumstances with those of the people next to the road:

It is part of the upbringing. Because this is an example. Look how these people suffer. My child is getting older now. He will ask me 'where is their water? Do they have water? There are no toilets. Where do they go to the toilet?' He is making comparisons now. He can see it with his own eyes. We have three flush toilets in the house and they don't have any. (...) So you become socially aware that there are differences. There are poor people and rich people. (Man in his forties, Vredeloof)

How can you hold on to a sense of reality when you're sitting inside a car - and my car may have cost a hundred thousand Rand, but I'm still sitting in a car - that will buy six houses for somebody else? (Man in his forties, Tamboerskloof)

Obviously, it cannot be assumed that a heightened awareness of inequalities necessarily brings about different attitudes and practices toward the poor. While many respondents were touched by the living conditions in the informal settlements, few indicated that privileged residents could – or should – do anything about them. A respondent in Tamboerskloof told me that he would drive passed the informal settlements and think that they 'have a big disadvantage in life', but that he would also wonder 'why they don't do more themselves'. In the same way, a Vredeloof resident revealed that her heart always broke when she saw squatters, but that they could not expect the local authorities to provide them all with housing. 'If you want to stay in a squatter camp', she said, 'that is your own choice. I won't take any responsibility for that as a white person'.

Indifference and passivity turned out to be much harder to justify, however, when focused interactions at home or at work added up to unfocused interactions through the windshield. In such cases, the anonymous strangers living on the roadside suddenly got a name. The dialog below is a good example. The underlying assumption is that daily contact with domestic workers allows privileged whites to 'jump' from the abstract level of the stereotypical stranger to the concrete level of the individual stranger in need. While the whole dialog is projected on residents of neighborhoods which are even richer than Tamboerskloof or Vredeloof, the bottom line is that visual encounters with poverty allow middle-class whites to fit their focused interactions with poor people in the bigger picture of a very unequal city:

- I think for some people who live in a very secluded white area like Constantia, or Bishopscourt, [a drive on the N2] is their only interaction, or their only sort of reminder that not everyone lives like I do. And I think that's important.
- I think for them the jump from Glanice who comes to clean the dishes to Glanice actually living like that, in a shack, ... (Man and woman in their thirties, Tamboerskloof)

Many respondents confirmed that their awareness and appreciation of the plight of the poor had been raised through the combination of visual exposure to poverty along the road and personal talks with domestic workers or colleagues living there. When I showed a woman living in a security complex in Tamboerskloof the photograph of Cape Town's central railway station, she told me that she felt sorry for her nanny who walked there every day. When I confronted her further in the interview with the photograph of the shacks next to the N2, she confessed that her nanny used to live in such a shack and that it must have been rather challenging for her to come to work in her fancy house. In the same way, she acknowledged that it was rather tough for her to drive along the N2 and think that her domestic worker was living in a shack like that. The comparison between her own living circumstances and those of her nanny confronted her with her own privilege:

Every day my nanny - who now has a flat, she used to live in a shack like this - she has to come to my work every day, to my house, and look after my children and wash my clothes and she comes from a place like that. So every day I was aware of it when she was coming from there. I used to think about it all the time. (Woman in her thirties, Tamboerskloof)

A number of respondents also indicated that stories of their domestic workers had urged them to do something about their precarious living conditions. In Tamboerskloof, someone told me that he had started to pay his domestic worker much more than the minimum salary and that he had always brought her home when she needed to work late. In order to make sure that her son would have more opportunities in life, he also paid his private school bills. Other respondents stated that they had bought a microwave, a fridge, clothes or even a simple house for their nannies, their gardeners or their housekeepers (cf. Schuermans, 2013).

Obviously, one needs to be very critical about such practices. By helping the son of the domestic worker to get a good education, the huge gap between rich and poor South Africans is not structurally addressed. Because small generosity weakens employees' chances to negotiate the terms and the conditions of their work situation, they can ultimately even serve the interest of employers (Cock, 1980). The fact that these close encounters fail to stimulate connections beyond their spatial and temporal immediacy does not imply that they are meaningless, however. If almost one-fifth of all South African women are domestic workers – as Dinkelman and Ranchhod (2012, p. 29) calculated – better working conditions and higher salaries can make a large-scale difference (cf. Schuermans, 2013, p. 685–686).

Because domestic work is still part and parcel of South African middle-class life, concrete encounters with underprivileged compatriots probably take place more often at home than anywhere else. Drawing on the discourses elaborated above, my argument is that such focused, place-bound interactions become more meaningful when they are complemented with unfocused, mobile interactions from the car windows. The interdependence between the exposure through the windshield and the face-to-face conversation at home is crucial. Both the home and the highway are, thus, part of a complex series of flows which connect different spaces, times and encounters with strangers (cf. Edensor, 2003, p. 154).

Discussion and conclusion

In 'Strange encounters', Ahmed (2000) argues that the figure of the stranger is produced through politics of vision and touch associated with embodied encounters with others. By way of conclusion, I will confront Ahmed's understandings of strangers and encounters with my findings in South Africa in three different, but interrelated steps. This will also allow me to come back to the cross-fertilization between the geographies of encounter literature and the new mobilities paradigm proposed in the beginning of this paper.

My first argument relates to the politics of vision. Ahmed (2000) explains that encounters with unknown others involve visual modes of recognition that differentiate between familiar and strange others. Her basic idea is that people read the bodies they face in order to ground aspects of their own identities and to recognize those of strangers. For Ahmed (2000, p. 3), 'the figure of the "stranger" is produced, not as that which we fail to recognize, but as that which we have already recognized as "a stranger"'.

In this context, it is essential that so many encounters in South Africa are refracted through the prism of fear and crime. Popular images of suspiciousness and victimhood are instigated by the visual recognition of race and class characteristics on the bodies of unknown others. In general, the respondents in Vredokloof and Tamboerskloof assume that poor blacks are much more fearsome than rich whites. They also think that people who look affluent and white are more vulnerable than others. An additional crime-related layer has been added to the long-established dichotomy between whiteness and blackness, so that many respondents feel safe when they encounter unfamiliar white people, but unsafe when they come across poor blacks they have never met.

Because of this, it is necessary to relinquish the naive assumption that interracial attitudes and cross-class practices are easily reconciled through visual exposure in public space. In fact, my research in two privileged neighborhoods of Cape Town demonstrates that many fleeting exchanges and incidental encounters with unknown others actually confirm or even re-instigate prevailing meanings, discomforts and anxieties around race and class. It is difficult, if not impossible, to trouble the preconceived categories of the strange and the familiar, whiteness and blackness, poverty and wealth, let alone to establish a bond between the privileged and the underprivileged, if the former only sees a potential criminal in the latter. Fearful

encounters in busy railway stations, in shared taxis or on the shoulder of the N2 produce the figure of the stranger as much as they are informed by it (cf. Schuermans, 2016a).

My second argument relates to the politics of touch. Ahmed (2000) clarifies that the body of the stranger is not only invested with meaning as a visual signifier that marks out social differences, but that it also polices these differences through touch or lack of touch. Starting from the observation that people allow the similar bodies of familiar others near, while they keep the abject bodies of strangers at bay, she infers that the function of the body as a marker of social differentiation is as tactile and haptic as it is visual and scopic. 'Just as some others are "seen" and recognized as stranger than other others', Ahmed (2000, p. 49) argues, 'so too some skins are touched as stranger than other skins'.

When I showed my respondents photographs of different means of transportation, the relationship between fear, touch and lack of touch was evident. While strategies to avoid touch are developed at the intimate scale of the body, they have far-reaching consequences at other spatial scales. If privileged residents of Cape Town retreat into an ever decreasing number of enclaves interlinked by car trips, it is because they do not want the bodies of strangers – which are easily identifiable by their visual appearance – to come so close that they might touch (cf. Schuermans, 2016a). The shortage of meaningful encounters is, therefore, not simply a by-product of the layout of the post-apartheid city. Instead, the deliberate circumvention of interactions with poor blacks is precisely an important driver behind the hardening of socio-spatial boundaries (cf. Schuermans, 2016b). This is evident not only in the proliferation of gated communities, secured office complexes and guarded shopping malls but also in the 'cocooned movement' expected from the car (cf. Butler & Hannam, 2014; Henderson, 2006).

My third argument relates to Ahmed's notion of encounter. For Ahmed (2000), encounters are not shaped by what is already seen and touched as strange. By definition, they involve both conflict and surprise: conflict because they can never be detached from broader relations of power and antagonism; surprise because they shift the boundaries of the familiar, the known and the strange.

A quick scan of both empirical sections in this paper teaches that such conflictual and surprising encounters are very uncommon among middle-class whites in Cape Town, but not completely unheard of. As much as they try to restrict their movements to heavily secured islands where disadvantaged people are few and far between, they can never avoid seeing the racialized poor on drives from one island to another. My interviewees suggested that such visual confrontations with poor strangers could not only bring about fear and indifference, but could also make them rethink long-standing ways of talking about - and dealing with – those they considered to be strangers before.

In reaching this conclusion, my empirical work raises two issues to be taken up in geographical studies on encounters. First, it is necessary to broaden the range of encounters under study. While most of the geographies of encounter literature has been preoccupied with co-operation in the parochial realm and unfocused interactions in the public realm, my interviews demonstrate that visual exposure to strange people, strange

objects and strange places can make people reconsider their attitudes and their practices toward those deemed to be strangers too (cf. Swanton, 2010, p. 451).

Obviously, observations through the windshield differ from unfocused interactions in streets, squares and other public spaces in many different ways. First of all, it is essential that such visual exposure occurs from the safety of the car. While many respondents are too afraid to mingle with strangers on foot, in a bus or in a shared taxi, the capsule of the car allows for unfocused interactions without fears of being touched and harmed.

Another essential point relates to the power relations involved. Much work on the geographies of encounter concludes that fundamental changes in practices and attitudes toward strangers are best achieved when different people of equal status engage in shared activities on a regular basis (e.g. Askins & Pain, 2011; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011). Nonetheless, my interviews suggest that the very asymmetrical act of watching and not being watched can be meaningful too. In South Africa, it is hard to imagine a situation where privileged whites would be on equal footing with underprivileged compatriots. According to Ahmed (2000), face-to-face or skin-to-skin meetings never occur between two subjects who are completely equal. Given the power asymmetries, such meetings necessarily imply conflict.

Secondly, my research confirms that there is an urgent need to overcome the sedentary thinking that runs through much of the geographies of encounter literature (cf. Kwan, 2013; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012). Many interviewees suggest that driving past an informal settlement or a poor township had become a completely different experience once they knew someone living under such circumstances. Regular exposure to informal settlements from the safe capsule of the car allowed them to contextualize their focused interactions with people living under such circumstances. In some cases, this encouraged them to see the humanity of those whom they had seen as strange or dangerous before.

This conclusion should temper optimistic, but simplistic views that visual confrontations alone can trouble stereotypes of privileged residents about those whom they have come to recognize as strangers. While studies on the geographies of encounter generally focus on place-bound, focused interactions in particular streets, neighborhoods and other (semi-) public spaces, my case study in Cape Town demonstrates how focused and unfocused interactions at different places can work together. In most scholarship on encounters with strangers, the mediation effect between different encounters in different places and times remains a black box. This box needs to be unwrapped, however, if we want to understand how privileged residents of a socially and spatially fragmented city such as Cape Town unlearn seeing and touching the people they perceive to be strangers as strangers.

Notes

1. See Schuermans (2011) for a detailed discussion of my sampling method, my interview topics, my coding strategies and the role of my own positionality. See Schuermans (2016b) for four shortcomings of the photo-elicitation technique I deployed.
2. Figures 1, 2 and 4, together with three short excerpts with quotations from my respondents, have been reprinted from Schuermans, N. (2016b). Enclave urbanism as telescopic urbanism. Encounters of middle class whites in Cape Town, *Cities*, doi:10.1016/j.cities.2016.02.002, Copyright (2016), with permission from Elsevier.

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