# The Hessequa Diaries

**Rubert Van Blerk (Feb 21)**

*I hear panting and gasping breath. I hear fleeing feet up the hillside – it is so immediate. In the distance I hear the incoherent bluster of the pursuers, then….*

*The piercing sound of a gunshot shocks me into wakefulness.*

*I am sitting upright, then leaning forward to unzip the opening of my tent. I am shaken as I am greeted by the cool night air filtering in from outside. I am still trembling and bracing for an imminent reckoning with fate.*

*Is this real! My mind screams at me to get out of the tent and see for myself. In the end I find myself standing outside. There is only silence, and I cannot see much. The darkness lies thick on this Towerland hillside.*

This dream – happening about two decades ago – returned as a vivid memory during the period of writing this piece. It happened during a visit to the Towerland wilderness, nestled at the foot of the Langeberg mountains, a few kilometres north of Herbertsdale in the Western Cape. It was a time to be alone, think, reflect, and decide. Two years later I started a new chapter in life when I joined the CDRA as a practitioner, leaving behind a 21-year career in education.

*Forgive me if this is still not adding up. The piece I have written is about my work, perhaps not the best example of it, but practice is about seeking consciousness in the work – albeit after the fact. Yet I risk the story because practice is more than the disciplined professional work we do out there, it is also about context and inner work, and I’m putting myself on the line. The story reveals a deep personal connection in the encounter between me and the ‘client’, though the latter (in parenthesis) is subject to debate. It reveals my grappling with the issue of identity in the Coloured community (a category emerging out of our racialised past) as it plays out through the work; it is a South African story and I suspect might also resonate elsewhere.*

This small assignment takes me into a rural community not far from where I had the dream many years before. I find myself in the village of Vermaaklikheid, situated about 300km east of Cape Town along the Cape south coast.Vermaaklikheid – translated directly from Afrikaans – means ‘entertainment’. Probably a spin from earlier times when – despite being a farming area – it was also a well-known holiday destination for those coming from neighbouring towns, even as far afield as Cape Town. The landscape is captivating, located along the upper reaches of the Duiwenhoks River estuary meandering through the hilly fynbos scrubland with the blue haze of the Langeberg mountains visible to the north. If the Almighty were a painter, then there surely had to be a pause before making this brushstroke; the natural beauty and abundance present here is palpable. For about a kilometre or so the village sprawls out along the main road with dispersed dwellings mixing with the indigenous milkwoods that are bountiful here.

If you were more fortunate among the fortunate you would have a piece of prime land along the banks of the estuary. The atmosphere is quiet and relaxed and provides the ideal holiday with plentiful swimming, boating, and fishing; the perfect backdrop for those lazy summer days. The landowners here are almost exclusively white people. During the colonial period and into Apartheid times, the area had long been occupied by incoming settlers. This occupation had started a few centuries ago in the 1700’s some decades after the Dutch had colonised the area around Cape Town. Despite this, most people living here are Coloured folk, a group of mixed race heritage and descendants of the indigenous Khoisan, an inclusive term for all non-Bantu peoples who inhabited the area for thousands of years. For generations they toiled and lived on farms in the surrounding area until into the 1990s, when the farms were partitioned and rapidly sold off in a lucrative property boom. The advent of democracy held a different promise for the landless poor, many were faced with eviction, homelessness, and further loss of livelihoods in the already depressed local economy. An ambitious government land reform project providing for home ownership and livelihood opportunities initiated soon after democracy failed to transform the situation, cruelly raising hopes later to be dashed by bureaucratic incompetence and lack of funding. This happened despite the sweat equity put in by the beneficiaries and the goodwill coming from some landowners, old and new.

They now live squeezed into a small settlement atop a hill called Skoolkop – almost hidden inside the sprawling Vermaaklikheid. The settlement consists of thirty or so houses almost all incomplete with their unpainted grey cement brick walls. And dotted between these are shacks accommodating the overflow of families living here now. As you travel the dirt road into Vermaaklikheid you will need to focus your attention otherwise you will miss the sudden turn up a steep incline to the left taking you in to this community.

It is a sunny Autumn Day in May when I find myself here in the village of Vermaaklikheid. The setting is a run-down hall; I get a sense that no conscious maintenance and care is being taken of the building; some windows and chairs are broken, and the inside doors are damaged. It is a dusty, forlorn place, the remains of a promise it once held for the local community when built 15 years prior. I had been asked to facilitate a meeting arranged to discuss the worsening problem of crime in the area. The crimes were mostly burglaries and petty theft perpetrated by youth from the Skoolkop community, with the vacant homes of the landowners being easy targets. Things had taken an ugly turn when a young man was badly burnt and hospitalised after a botched burglary. Two women, one being the mother, approached the Duiwenhoks Conservancy[[1]](#footnote-2) for help, setting off a chain of events leading to this moment. Invitations were sent to its members and the residents of Skoolkop were ‘canvassed’ to attend.

There are over twenty people sitting in a circle. About three quarters are from the local ‘holiday makers’, a quaint term used to refer to those who are from the city and who have bought land in the area on which they built or renovated their holiday homes. For this piece of writing we will call them landowners. This is South Africa, so the landowners are all white people. The rest, five of us to be exact, are Coloured. Though the landowners had responded well to the invitation the people from Skoolkop (where the majority of Vermaaklikheid’s residents lived) did not. As the facilitator, I had been thrown a curve ball of sorts, and my mind is racing about how to proceed.

The choice of facilitator was important, my command of the Afrikaans language for one, and shall I say that I resembled the people very well. If I were white, I would end up facilitating silence, inferiority was so deeply internalised. It was assumed that people would feel more comfortable with me; it made sense. The idea was to have a dialogue involving both the landowners and people of Skoolkop, raising the issues, and setting up a process to address these with the two sides in mutual collaboration. But how can this happen when the coloured folk were significantly outnumbered by the landowners and in the first place, why did so few turn up?

*So, it is not entirely unusual to receive a request for facilitation, usually it is short-term lasting a day or so, even half a day in many cases. For an independent practitioner these often present opportunities to form new relationships and exposure to diverse and interesting work settings. Sometimes with a good ‘fit’ being established there is the possibility of a longer term of engagement with the client. For the client, the skills of a social practitioner can be of great value in enabling a conducive environment for dialogue, creating a safe and equal space for participation especially where there is diversity of participants and ideas. Still, one does not just step into a new situation, I will have conversations with the client and get as much background as I need. Where possible I will ask to interview a few other participants. In this case I had email contact as well as conversations with one of the landowners and a shorter engagement with one of the Skoolkop residents on my arrival in Vermaaklikheid. These conversations help me to achieve some familiarity and connection with participants and enough of a picture of what is being asked of me. The ‘contract’ is less formal, an email request with a short description and outline of expectations for the meeting will usually suffice. I was also intrigued by Vermaaklikheid, a rather peculiar name for a place. I had not known of its existence before coming here, and even more, I would have the opportunity to work in a rural setting engaging with people with whom I have much affinity.*

*We return to the scene…*

I’m grappling with the moment with all eyes now on me to get things going. I ask that everyone introduce themselves by telling their story, describing their connection to the place, and what they loved about Vermaaklikheid. I’m amazed at what is unfolding. Everyone shares a deep and sincere love and connection to the place. Indeed, I’m in agreement, as a visitor to the village I’m already left enchanted by its delights. However, when hearing those from the settlement speaking, I start to get a sense of the history and ancestral bonds to the place. They once were children here growing up with their parents and grandparents. We are hearing of the better times when there was a thriving economy and a Vermaaklikheid reputed in the region for its farm produce including hanepoot grapes and sweet potatoes. This was a time before the establishment of Skoolkop, just over a decade and a half ago and well within the memory of this adult generation. One of the men shares, *Ja, ons was arm maar ons was gelukkig.* Translated, *yes, we were poor, but we were happy*. I could sense an energy in the room with the few Coloured folk feeling increasingly emboldened and proud.

We turn to the issue bringing us here – crime. A mother reports on her son’s healing, but the physical and psychological effects of the trauma will remain. The hall becomes quiet as everyone listens; there is empathy here in this unusual gathering. *There are no job opportunities here in the village and our youth are idle, tik[[2]](#footnote-3) has become a huge problem,* says the boy’s father. Then a landowner living permanently in the village points to the general problem of excessive drinking in the Skoolkop community – particularly over weekends. The mother, visibly annoyed, reacts angrily to this claim, snapping back that she takes exception to hearing such generalisations: she is an abstainer. He retreats and the tension subsides.

We now move on to what can be done and I have a little process for this with smaller groups forming around the individuals from Skoolkop. Besides generating ideas, it is also an opportunity for building relationship among those present as well as opening space for more voices. A buzz quickly forms in the groups, even some light-hearted laughter, I am always left spellbound when human beings connect with each other. I feel terrible breaking up these conversations when I call them back to the big circle. We take feedback from the groups. One can feel the energy of thinking in the circle, but it is mainly the landowners speaking. *We should commission a project to gather and write up the history of the village. This could then be connected to the development of a heritage walk for the area, possibly opening an income generating opportunity for locals*. This is accompanied with lots of nods as the idea is energetically delivered. *Let us organise a Christmas feast where we bring together the various communities of Vermaaklikheid* is another idea. These possible ventures did not address crime directly, but they would go a long way to educate and connect people across the racial divides of the place. Finally, there was agreement that another meeting should be convened as soon as possible. This would allow for more time to get the entire Skoolkop community on board.

*I am feeling joyful. I would love to continue working here, it’s an opportunity to work with people I’m drawn to, and it is rural. It is within sight of the Langeberge which I have hiked almost end to end, and within reach of the southerly gusts blowing in from the Indian Ocean, the southern Cape coast, another favourite place of mine. An opportunity to do on the ground community development work. It is 2016 and in CDRA we are vexing about what is core for the organisation, I am thinking it is called the Community Development Resource Association, surely there lies the answer.*

*This first encounter was to provide facilitation for a meeting. The possibility that it could evolve into a longer engagement did come up in discussion with Johan – the concerned landowner (and member of the local conservancy group) who had reached out to CDRA. Between the two of us there were many conversations. Vermaaklikheid represented a microcosm of South Africa yet was small enough to make a difference: with the right intentions and everyone on board, it could become an example of redress, economic development, healing, and social cohesion for the rest of the country … we were on to something here. Buoyed by the outcome of my first visit I sent an email proposing several steps including maintaining contact with the community leaders and supporting them in lobbying Skoolkop residents so that we ensure a good turnout next time. I would also want to spend a day meeting people either individually or in groups before the next meeting. However, at this point there still was no contract, nor even mention of one, and while being consumed by how this is all working out for the country, for me, and perhaps even CDRA, the question of who the client was just did not occur. So far, I had only been dealing with one person connected to the conservancy, I had no relationship with the Skoolkop community, by all accounts this engagement was not even their idea. Why did this happen, perhaps a momentary loss of consciousness or the inevitable confluence of so many trajectories – how does one breathe deeply and hold still in the moment?*

*I am emotionally connected. I have been with the CDRA for 12 years and have had several encounters working with rural communities in the Western and Northern Cape, all leaving indelible marks on my practice. But this time it is becoming personal, in this new connection and – unwittingly – I am to rediscover my own story.*

It would be nearly another four months before my return. During this time, I am regularly on the phone with Joanne, one of the leaders in Skoolkop. It is a difficult time. I learn that her husband’s life had come to a tragic end some years before and it was fast approaching the next anniversary of his death. Her grieving is unbearable, and she is not getting much sleep. I naturally step in, providing supportive counselling - after all, I am a trained psychologist. This is the beginning of an enduring relationship, alive even up to the writing of this piece. At the same time Joanne and the other leader are making progress – albeit slowly – to prepare Skoolkop for my next visit. By August eighteen families have been canvassed and it is reported that the people are positively inclined to my visit and the fact that I would be meeting with them.

It was a Thursday afternoon in early September when Johan and I arrive in Vermaaklikheid with looming rainy weather forecasted. The long drive from Cape Town provides much time to get into a conversation and learn more about each other. Sitting around the hearth in this newly built cottage by the riverside, I can appreciate the dream of owning a piece of Vermaaklikheid paradise. I learn that this beautiful place has its own story, rebuilt on the ruins of a previous cottage which fell victim to an arson attack happening during the surge of crime in the area. I am struck by his sincere connection to the place, the acknowledgement of lingering social injustice and an aspiration for doing something about it. I have no reason to doubt this; I am in the company of a person who has made significant sacrifices in the struggle for freedom in this country. Yet I feel the contradiction: here I am, just a stone’s throw from Skoolkop but in another world, a guest in that world.

The next morning I’m greeted by a cool and wet Vermaaklikheid as it had rained overnight. I cycled the few kilometres via a muddy road leading into the village and then up the steep rutted track into Skoolkop to meet the two leaders. I am greeted with a full schedule of introductions and meetings which would last the whole day. In all I am seeing about 20 or so people, mostly in groups but also some individuals, and not forgetting a lunch being prepared at Joanne’s house. It seemed lots of preparation had been done for this day. The message had been dutifully relayed that I was coming and that I was interested to meet and hear the views of people around the issues being experienced. This included their views regarding the meeting called for the next day: what their expectations and concerns were.

There was no telling what the day had in store. For my first interview Joanne introduced me to the oldest resident who lived in the village just beneath Skoolkop. I stepped in to her tiny hartbeeshuisie, with its tall reed roof and thick mud walls set off the main road running through Vermaaklikheid. I was welcomed with an unmistaken rural warmth and hospitality that left me glowing on the inside. The tiny room was filled to almost bursting with a few pieces of furniture, the dining table taking centre stage. The walls were adorned with pictures, ornaments – some dating back to the time of her parents. A kitchen and bedroom led from here, a modest home by all accounts. Light streamed from a little window behind me where I sat squeezed in behind the table. I listened to her story.

For 30 years she was in the employ of a prominent family who had settled in the area. She went on, saying that much had changed here, but not for the better. There was a relative absence of crime until five years ago when they experienced the first burglary. However, nothing came of it, with the police failing to take any action. And the fact that the “English” (another term for the holiday maker landowners) tended to withdraw the cases had resulted in the current situation where there is impunity, a sense that there is no consequence for acts of criminality. She bemoaned the fact that Vermaaklikheid had no clinic, whereas the neighbouring Slangrivier community had one. *Voorheen was hier als, en nou is daar niks*, translated, *we used to have everything here, and now there is nothing*. All municipal services and everything else needed to sustain a living had to be purchased in the town of Riversdale, a 40km trip along a dirt road out of Vermaaklikheid. This she could not understand. I too could not. For many this is the cruel paradox of contemporary South Africa two decades on into democracy. I could clearly hear her disappointment, yet I did not sense any bitterness.

Starting here, the experience of loss was to become an enduring theme as the day progressed. After trudging back up the road leading into Skoolkop, I arrived at the doorstep of the next family. The door opens and I’m also greeted by the smell of woodsmoke. The grip of poverty is clearly visible in their battered house. I’m shown to a small space where I can sit in the sparsely furnished home. To my right a worn curtain covers the window facing the road outside. There is a wood burning stove crackling fiercely on the other end, putting up a spirited battle against the cold inside the house, with the naked cement bricks and roof sheets providing scant protection from the elements outside. A girl sits close by diligently tending the stove. I hear that she had passed matric the previous year, unemployed, she now sits at home. Her mother and aunt have joined me for the interview. Turning towards the young woman I ask whether she had dreams and what would need to change here for her to feel that she has a future. I must project my voice slightly to be heard above the crackling fire. For a tiny moment, our eyes meet, a faint smile, then a quick return to the blank and detached stare she started with. Despite her mother’s coaxing to respond, there was plainly no warming to be had towards my end of the room. I felt a twinge of frustration and sadness. When I was her age, I was in my first year at university studying to become a teacher. Despite it being during Apartheid times, by some twist of fate, I had a path opening for me that would take me beyond my parents. Perhaps she could only see as far as the next holiday season when there was the prospect of domestic work coming her way from the landowners. For me, a searing glimpse into the lives of the youth in this community. This gloom becomes accentuated by her mother’s words, *ek weet nie waar ons geval het nie*, translated, *I do not know where we have fallen*, expressing her exasperation. The notion of self-blame and bearing sole responsibility for their poverty echoed through this statement.

*My task here is to connect with the people, begin to build relationship and develop my understanding of the situation. From the initial meeting two months earlier, this assignment was shaping into something bigger and over a longer term and this process of building relationship was an important entry point. After many years of working as a psychologist and OD practitioner I also know that people usually want to open up and tell their stories – people have an insatiable thirst for being listened to and being heard. Facilitation is made so much easier when you have made these at times intimate connections with the participants beforehand, the familiarity helps and the beginnings of trust forming makes all the difference. Something is starting to cause worry. Despite feeling welcomed into these humble homes and experiencing the openness to engage, there is no sense of anticipation for the big meeting in the hall taking place the next day.* I am told that they have little hope for the meeting as there was much conflict in Skoolkop. I then ask more directly, *are you coming*, and the answer, a shrug of the shoulder meaning not likely.

The next family I visit are faring better. Their house has a neat fence with a gate, and I pass by a small garden leading to the front door. The house is painted, and the inside has a homely feel. Both husband and wife are employed. He is a rietdak[[3]](#footnote-4) craftsman in the building trade while she works as a shop assistant in the town. Three other members of the community have also joined us. I hear that the big changes started when the older generation of farmers died out and their children chose to partition and sell off the land. Change of ownership meant a loss of tenure for the farm workers and their families who had lived here for generations. Living on the farms meant having access to a means of livelihood; they were poor but they could grow their own food. Fish used to be plentiful, but the partitioning of land and erection of fences meant that access to the river had become closed off, adding to their hardship. One pointed out that this provided a context for understanding the spate of burglaries happening in the area.

Illicit activity was rife. Some had started selling alcohol, even tik, and there was mention made of an individual in the village producing home-made alcohol. Then a moment of frustration. I venture sharing that I had heard there was a high level of alcohol abuse and domestic violence in the community. I go further and mention that this appears to be a problem that mainly men were having yet despite this I was only seeing women taking up the issues. My provocation to the two men in the conversation was not engaged with, merely dismissed by a shaking head and a disinterested smile. It unsettles me inside, but I don’t react. I have seen this all too often, Coloured men absconding from taking responsibility. Centuries of colonial and Apartheid emasculation has produced a particularly vile form of patriarchy.

My next meeting is with an even larger group, consisting of four women and three men. Here there is discord being expressed, allegations of mistreatment of one over the other. *There is lots of selfishness in this community, people are being exploited, we are charged almost half the “Allpay” (monthly grant) money by the fortunate few who have vehicles just to go and buy our groceries in Riversdale*, says another. I feel the acrimony in the accusations. The conversation reveals further wrongdoing by some on others. I hear about building materials which had mysteriously disappeared during the building phase of Skoolkop, creating further hardship to the would-be homeowners struggling to complete their homes. The dark underbelly of the community was being revealed and I’m caught a bit off guard by its intensity. Then I rather naively enquire as to whether they see this initiative as an opportunity to move beyond the discord and loathing; were they ready to do the work of healing and finding each other again? My question is met with blank stares.

It is getting late and Joanne had insisted that I present myself for lunch at her place. By this time the weather had improved, and the meal was prepared to be eaten outside on the stoep. I feel like an honoured guest among some others who have also been invited. The conversation is lighter, but I can’t relax yet as I have one more household to visit, one that I’m not quite relishing at that point in time.

This family stirred controversy in Vermaaklikheid. Jolene, a coloured woman from the area, was married to a white man who had moved there over 40 years ago, bought land, and set up a dairy farm. In several of my conversations thus far including with landowners, reference was made to this family. The belief was that Jolene was the dark force behind the spate of crime in the area. At that point, their son was an awaiting trial prisoner accused of theft. I had requested to also meet with her if they were open to my visit. The family lived on the edge of the village. I would pass by their house on my way back to the cottage where I was staying.

I felt trepidation, not quite knowing what to expect. I found the gate and walked to the house set back a bit further up the hill on which it was built. I am not sure how large, but the size of this property was significant and overlapped both sides of the road. This was not Skoolkop, it was Vermaaklikheid proper, and Jolene was a landowner. I was welcomed by a tall smiling woman who looked like she was expecting me. I was ushered in past the kitchen and into an elegantly furnished sitting room. Her husband then stepped in and introduced himself. He was a tall man, elderly, and appeared still physically strong. He asked me where I was from in Cape Town, and we established an immediate connection as he used to have a business in the area close to where I grew up. He spoke quickly and his age-worn lungs were struggling to keep up, resulting in moments of gasping for breath. His wife coaxed him to slow down. We were then joined by their daughter, with baby in arms. By now I was over my trepidation. Clearly, they were filled with anticipation for this visit and had a lot to get off their chests.

Time flew very quickly. We chatted; well, I listened for over two hours. This was a pivotal moment and as I recall the memory, I am again struck by the triumph and tragedy of this country. *When the capitalists moved in, they did not introduce themselves*! This reference to the new landowner elite not only revealed a deep disdain but also an explicit political angle and I can’t help feeling a sense of affinity. Was he a communist inspired by those famed for the contribution to the freedom struggle in my country? For certain I was getting a rare and privileged glimpse into this family. *We are between them, like a fly in the ointment*. The point being made was clear, their smallholding was a black stain in the surrounding white owned land. The new neighbour landowners were encroaching, with a current dispute around extraction of water from a spring situated on their land. They were receiving letters from hostile law firms as far afield as Stellenbosch acting on behalf of prospective buyers. I am given a yellowed and worn photo of a large boat berthed at Port Beaufort, a small harbour about a 30-minute drive south-east of Vermaaklikheid. The fishing vessel was destroyed a few years prior in a calculated firebomb attack. Jolene, who was a prominent figure in the local fishing industry and the only woman of colour, was financially ruined by this incident. As I understood later, the impact was also felt by several families in the area who derived an income as fishermen.

Of course, we must also engage the immediate concerns about crime, the reason for my visit. I am hearing another version, the family being a target of an orchestrated campaign of vilification that includes the Riversdale police. Their son’s incarceration was a direct result of this conspiracy. It makes for compelling listening, and I am absorbed, feeling almost heart-broken, here at the home of the “villains” of Vermaaklikheid.

Not much was said about Skoolkop but I know that Jolene is a controversial figure and I have heard a number of allegations connecting her to the spate of crime. Some fear losing income arising out of crime with landowners becoming ever more suspicious of their employees. The bonds of kinship are also close in this place with most people being related in some way. I learn that Jolene and Joanne have close family relations. Who to believe and where to begin unravelling this complexity? I have inhaled deeply into this air, and it is thick with wrong and betrayal on more levels than I can think of.

*I am feeling exhausted, but my mind continues fervently throughout the evening with nearly an hour spent sitting at the river scribbling reflections into my notebook and then into the night. There is much more that can be told but I will stop my detailed account here adding just a few more broad brushstrokes.*

The next day turned out, well, vastly different from what was hoped. The community meeting failed to draw even a handful of people, resulting in cancellation. Jolene though was there on time. I observed her walking through the gate, standing out in dress and demeanour. There was something very different about this woman, her measured voice when she spoke, and a presence of calm quiet authority. At midday we hastily arranged that the food prepared be taken from the hall in the village to the rickety wooden hall in Skoolkop, so, if nothing else, people could at least come for something to eat. I spent most of the day in the company of Jolene and while this was happening the two other leaders were conspicuous by their absence. At the time I did not question this clear manifestation of the division and mistrust between these people. I hung around eating and chatting informally with those coming for lunch. It was important for the community to see me as impartial, and after all Jolene was a key player in finding any long-lasting solution given what I had heard so far. Later that afternoon we walked back the distance to her home, and she continued further with me to the gate, opening the track to Johan’s place about a kilometre or so further on. In parting, she insisted that I ask Johan to hoot as we drive by her place the next morning as she wanted to greet and bid us a safe journey back to Cape Town. What an amazing gesture that would be, I thought; would this be the beginning of reconciliation and a new civility between these neighbours?

From that moment I maintained contact with Joanne and increasingly Jolene. The conservancy remained an outlier in the process. My connection with Johan declined as he was forced to withdraw due to a change in personal circumstances. Contact here became characterised by commissioning of further work, reporting, and invoicing. However, it would take another two years before returning to Vermaaklikheid. The mission remained as is – getting the Skoolkop community into a room and into conversation. This time Jolene stepped into lobby among the Skoolkop families and indeed there was marginal success in getting the rickety hall about half full on the day. The next day I joined in a meeting held by members of the conservancy, my first in-person contact with the organisation where I tried to sum up what had transpired, sharing some reflections and recommendations for the future. I used the opportunity to push an angle, that the Conservancy can more consciously leverage its projects in the area to grow its connection with the people of Skoolkop, extending opportunities to others in the community beyond the familiar few they had been working with. This was followed up with a formal report with detailed recommendations along with an offer to support the conservancy in its thinking about how to play a meaningful role.

*In my own words my practice is about helping others towards greater awareness, to connect with more of themselves, to see their unfolding stories both individually and collectively as a living process, deeply human, to be respected and honoured. And in the seeing, pathways may emerge and the possibility of conscious choices to be exercised.*

*After all this time of stopping and starting, the question of core purpose and who was my client became foregrounded more clearly than any time before. The Conservancy representing the landowners in the area surely also had a need for deep introspection, sensitivity, and sharper strategies in how they related with the Skoolkop community. My thoughts go to that meeting held during the Easter of 2016 where the mother of the severely burnt boy approached the conservancy for help. With the benefit of hindsight, was this “help” a carefully selected facilitator who would help them to fix themselves, or was there something much deeper and profound needed? Perhaps I should have pushed to keep on with the joint meetings with landowners and Skoolkop residents, maybe even convening them in the rickety hall in the middle of Skoolkop? We all have our own work to do, but there is work that can only be done together, courageously – scary stuff and I may have faltered in seeing the opportunity. It is an outrage that the people of Skoolkop– like the general poor in this country – continue to be problematized, and here I am caught colluding with the powerful.*

*I have learnt a few lessons or perhaps more accurately, I have reconfirmed some critical principles of practice. Yes, that very first conversation before entering the intervention could have been different, a few more brave probing questions, being more grounded rather than being unconsciously swept by what I was hearing and my own needs. As far as I know there was no harm done and my recommendations to the conservancy still apply. My connection to the Skoolkop community and Vermaaklikheid continues. Last year during the Covid19 lockdown Joanne contacted me about the hardships suffered by the local residents. A call to an NGO focussing on the relief effort resulted in an initiative to deliver food parcels and clothing bringing some relief at a critical time. I am consoled by the thought that the intervention did allow for some seeds to be sowed now waiting for its time to sprout. At the same time the future of this place lies intertwined in our collective destiny as a South African nation striving to come to terms with a legacy of historic racism and injustice, inequality and exclusion.*

*I’m left with an unresolved question, does this context not imply a new frontier, a new and substantive arena for practice, how we consciously think and do our work, how we navigate deep societal fissures arising from race, class etc., and our activism for achieving social justice and meaningful change.*

At the time I did not know but my foray into Vermaaklikheid was to become a signature moment in my career as a development practitioner, prising open a relationship with this community (still alive to this day) while also reopening or perhaps widening a window into myself and this country of my birth. We are all on our own paths and arising out of this confluence with Vermaaklikheid is an opening of another arena in my quest to find the missing pieces that make up who I am and where I come from, to stand more strongly in my ground. I am taking my own healing further, finding new inspiration to practice, the courage to write. Unwittingly the people of Skoolkop act as a spur digging into my sides and pushing me further on this damaged and precarious pathway. The realisation that they may have done more for me than I for them is discomforting – but it kills the idea that one is completely detached in this work – I was also being shaped by the intervention. My redemption if one can call it that is perhaps the act of writing to render this visible, making it available for others to learn from and to understand. I’m hoping for the possibility that my story can reveal a pathway that others with similar brokenness can follow. Perhaps it may reveal insights and questions about how this practice responds to a situation such as this where one confronts the disaster of centuries of injustice and the systematic erasure of a human connection to place and birth right.

Let me say some more about myself. I am from Cape Town. I have just reached my sixtieth year and the term coloured with which I identify no longer carries the sting of shame that it once did. I grew up in a family of five siblings. Features such as hair and complexion are quite pronounced in coloured families and I daresay that together the five of us bring the best on offer drawn from all the three streams flowing into this group of people. My mother’s side served a good dose of Khoisan and slave ancestry while my father brought more of the European side, though I’ve heard of the existence of a great, great grandmother of slave origin on his side. My first experience of a white person was at the tender age of four. It was a policeman. I was taken to the local station by my father to force the truth out of me relating to an instance of naughtiness. I sat trembling in the car, my tears flowing freely, stammering and stuttering to make a sentence while through the window a tall figure in blue uniform stared down at me. The fear of hell was etched in deeply. I remember becoming very aware of my darker skin tone while accompanying my grandmother to town by bus. She was old and could not climb up the narrow steep stairs to sit in the upstairs section reserved for “non-whites”. “Fortunately,” her skin was much lighter than mine, but I clearly remember the feeling that I did not belong sitting there, that I somehow was not worthy enough, and that it had to do with my pigmentation, something over which I had entirely no control.

Growing up in a designated ‘group area’[[4]](#footnote-5) can be a very ‘sheltering experience’. My next significant encounters with white people occurred when I started my career as a teacher. But so too with black people. Life in Cape Town was racially stratified, probably more so than other parts of the country. Soon after the birth of our democracy in the mid 1990’s, after qualifying as a psychologist, I was fortunate to be assigned to an institution located in a black urban township; a period of my career that I treasure dearly. Ever since my political awakening during the student revolts of 1976, university, and early working life I had strongly identified with the struggle for freedom and human rights, identifying as a black South African.

During the aftermath of the first democratic election when coloured people voted overwhelmingly for the former oppressor, I had to confront the somewhat romantic idea that had formed in my head that I was black. There were nuances here that I had to begin to appreciate. Differences in history, experiences, language, traditions, that were a part of me, yet still to be acknowledged and celebrated. Since then, I have been on a long and arduous journey, reclaiming the scattered parts of myself, and building afresh, layer upon painful layer. I must hastily add that where I am arriving at is not the acrimony of our current identity politics. It is a love for my roots and associations with this group, and an acknowledgement that our identity stories are continually changing. Perhaps the coloured experience at its best can be a useful marker for the still nascent and fragile broader South African and African identity and social cohesion that is yet to become.

The point is that this is how I come into Vermaaklikheid; it is all flowing behind me in my wake. I have always had a special connection to these communities in my work, actively seeking out opportunities, and the more rural the better. Peculiar as it might sound, I love the language Afrikaans (the mother tongue of my parents) and the way that it is spoken here. It is like listening to a recurring song that you remember from childhood. I am also an urban boy, educated and middle class, points of power that if unconsciously held can easily scupper my attempts to establish relationship and trust.

My curiosity has been evoked, and again I am drawn to rediscovering a shared history that is uncontaminated by the colonial narrative on which we were force fed for so long. It is opening new vistas to my understanding, provoking powerful feelings of belonging.

It is undisputed that there were people living here long before the Cape was “discovered” and in fact the coloured folk now living in Skoolkop are their descendants. It is instructive to note that in 2005 the municipal area was renamed the Hessequa Local Municipality after the indigenous Khoisan people who lived in the area for millennia and into colonial times. Hessequa means *people of the trees*, suffix *qua* meaning people. During precolonial times, the areas south of the Langeberg mountain range consisted of large expanses of forests stretching far south towards the coast. Today remnants of these forests can still be encountered deeper into the northern mountains while the wood on lower slopes and foothills was consumed to feed the colonial machine. The Hessequa were a pastoralist people sharing direct connections with the first modern human beings to emerge on this planet. They were wealthy, owning vast herds of cattle and sheep, the original “discoverers” and landowners in this part of the Cape. These indigenes were decimated through conflict with land hungry settlers, their cattle taken.

Successive plagues of smallpox introduced by passing ships to Cape Town may even have reached this far. Colonisation brought with it even further horrors. There is clear evidence of officially sanctioned genocide taking place throughout the Cape where the indigenes were hunted as trophies no different to more contemporary terrors of ethnic cleansing. For the so-called Christian Europeans this could only happen if these people were not regarded as human. There are many written accounts of the time describing the indigenes as heathen blood thirsty savages, a most astounding projection made by the colonialists. Poverty ensued where in the end these once thriving peoples were now forced to assimilate in this new colonial reality, becoming lowly farm workers toiling for their colonial masters on the same land which once held their flourishing herds.

I now understand where that dream came from on that dark night in Towerland.

The history of the Cape – it is complicated. Soon after they permanently settled here in 1652 the Dutch started taking wives from the local indigenous population. Slaves were also introduced by our new colonial masters brought in from West and East Africa, Madagascar, India, and Malaysia. Cape Town was emerging as a strategic port town along a lucrative sea route between Europe and the east. At the time only a handful of white women lived here. Racial mixing became commonplace and continued during the time of the English missionaries who themselves took local wives after the Cape became part of the British Empire in 1795. The Cape has a history of brutal subjugation of one people by another, yet at the same time, so much intimacy between the conquerors and conquered. The birthing cry of a new-born was both a joyous and tenuous moment, the latter especially for the child. If you were lucky enough to have your father’s complexion, your future was secured, inheritance, access to loans, a future. However, many of us did not turn out that way. Significantly, a people of mixed heritage emerged in the Cape and are the largest population group living in the Western Cape, a merging out of the local Khoisan, bantu, and incoming European and slave streams.

The people I was working with in Vermaaklikheid regard themselves as coloured, or in Afrikaans you will hear them say “kleurling”. This is all part of their story. The term “coloured” itself is a loaded word: it first came to be used soon after the Cape fell under British control. Before that there were other crude sounding terms. The Dutch coined the term “Kaapmans” and then the more contemptible “Hotentot”, a play on the click sounds made by the people encountered here. The term “bastaards” was used interchangeably with “basters” to refer to the offspring of liaisons between Europeans, slaves and Khoisan. The English term “bastard” derogatively refers to a person born out of wedlock, an illegitimate child. In my personal experience I clearly remember a chapter in my Grade 6 history textbook with the title, “The Coloured Problem”. This negativity attached to these labels runs deep and have been passed on across generations even though today there exists a broader identification with the term coloured.

Why this contempt? What are the reasons and evidence providing justification for such supremacy and loathing? Or was this dehumanisation just a pretext for overseeing the deliberate dispossession of these early peoples and their descendants? Modern human beings are thought to have emerged roughly 150 000 years ago in Africa. However, for long it was believed that modern thought and behaviour first appeared in Europe around 40 000 years ago with the discovery of implements and drawings found in caves in Spain and the south of France. As part of my preparation for writing this article I did some further reading about the area around Vermaaklikheid. I picked up on a recent archaeological discovery providing evidence of modern human behaviour in Africa. The Blombos Cave yielded abstract rock drawings and other cultural and symbolic artefacts of over 70 000 years old, significantly predating the ones found in Europe. This was a disruptive discovery with global repercussions. However, beyond the archaeological, this surely has even greater significance. The mere idea that modern thought and cultural behaviour had evolved here in this place is profound. Yet for the inhabitants of Skoolkop, is this an element contained in their imagination of themselves, even the possibility of claiming it as part of their story? The Blombos Cave is situated on a private nature reserve just over 20 minutes’ drive out of the heart of Vermaaklikheid.

Everyone has a sense of identity, an idea of who you are, where you come from and where you are going. Out of this comes a sense of belonging, to a people with shared history, myths, culture, and a place associated with home. However, Vermaaklikheid – as part of the former Cape Colony – has experienced violent subjugation, systematic dispossession and slavery occurring well over two centuries before the establishment of the Boer Republics[[5]](#footnote-6) and the declaration of the 1913 Natives Land Act[[6]](#footnote-7). Still unresolved, coloured communities carry these deep wounds passed on from generation to generation, evoking intense emotions. The shadow is seen in the Cape Flats gangland, self-hatred, and denial of the African within, evidence of this scarring turned on itself. The light is seen in our ability to endure; we are still here, to laugh and to have embodied the diversity of our great mothers and fathers.

I am the development practitioner here and in many ways their story is also my story; at least there are significant parts that we share. How can this situation be transformed without deep healing, facing the shame of internalised inferiority, feeling the anger and loss of accrued injustice, opening to, and embracing the wretched human being still breathing deep within? The same goes for the descendants of the white colonisers who continue to enjoy their unearned privilege while being surrounded by injustice. Is the latter not dehumanisation taking another form, but do they know this, and that they too have work to do? Perched on a hilltop and out of view, you can drive through Vermaaklikheid without even knowing that Skoolkop exists. It remains invisible, the people marooned on a tiny island, forgotten, in a sea of change. Perhaps at that juncture in May of 2016 I was oblivious of what exactly I was getting myself into.

*It is 2019 and exactly one year after my last visit to Vermaaklikheid. CDRA is closing and I am packing for a trip to Towerland where a group of people are meeting for a week to begin work on the organisation’s final contribution to the world, a publication on practice. The phone rings, I see the caller ID, it is Jolene, I feel a tinge of excitement, but instead I am greeted by her daughter. It is bad news. Jolene had died during the early hours of that Saturday morning. That week she had unexpectedly taken ill and was hospitalised in Riversdale, a small town that I would be travelling past later that day. This gave birth to my writing.*

1. The Duiwenhoks Conservancy is a non-profit organisation formed in 2000 and made up of local stakeholders (mainly landowners) who are committed to conserving the village of Vermaaklikheid, the Duiwenhoks river valley and surrounding area for the benefit of all communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. A local term for methamphetamine, otherwise known as crystal meth. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. A ceiling made of bamboo-like reeds laid over wooden beams, common in Cape colonial houses and now a fashionable addition in newer luxury homes. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The Group Areas Act was the title of three acts of the Parliament of South Africa enacted under the apartheid government of South Africa. The acts assigned racial groups to different residential and business sections in urban areas in a system of urban apartheid (Wikipedia) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The Boer Republics (sometimes also referred to as Boer states) were independent, self-governed republics in the last half of the nineteenth century, created by the Dutch-speaking inhabitants of the Cape Colony and their descendants. (Wikipedia) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The Natives LandAct (No. 27 of 1913) was passed to allocate only about 7% of arable land to Africans and leave the more fertile land for whites. ([www.sahistory.org.za](http://www.sahistory.org.za)) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)