

DIARY

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Extracts from an abortive travelogue, written somewhat in the style of Hunter S. Thompson for reasons best not elaborated here

'Day 1. A large group of strangers are milling around a bus in Maboneng, waiting for the historic first lunch of the 2014 JWTC. Some people are deep in conversation. Some are already networking. Some look a little anxious. Everyone is awkwardly friendly, wearing their finest conference smiles. I lock up my bicycle, my sign of insiderness, my proof that I belong here. I refuse to be intimidated. But am perhaps a little too relieved when the person sitting next to me is funny, and orders wine.

'Day 3. There are a lot of clever people on this trip but none of them can compare to John. John is superhuman. I've no idea how he got that enormous bus down that tiny road in the dark but I've never been so pleased to arrive at a game farm before. There's a fire. There's a bar. There's a warthog. And tomorrow there will be Francoise and bananas.

'Day 5. The bus has become The Bus, and we have half a country to cross. My ethnic compulsion to consume free food in case the Nazis come back remains undimmed in the face of endless breakfast buffets. Someone decides that we should take a different route, but it's a route without the right kind of toilet stops. People pile out at a petrol station and wipe its shelves clean of Nik Naks, biltong and bottled water. Are we lost? I think we might be lost.

'We stop for lunch, which turns into dinner, which turns into a magical, surprising party - a dance off, where intellectual celebrities do the Macarena to a song produced by an old festival friend from London; an ill-advised swim across a dark lagoon, a dive into the waves, a full moon glinting on warm water. People scuffle good-naturedly over the last few prawns. For a few hours no one really thinks about why we're here. It's enough that we are.

'Day 8. I think it's Sunday. I excavate myself from a hotel bed, trudge through another hotel breakfast, drag myself outside and slump on my usual seat. There is no hierarchy here except the one we've invented; people in the front, the serious ones, versus people at the back, the ones who make the distinction. Buses always mean the same thing, even in your 30s.

'The general health of the bus is deteriorating. I sleep through most of the day, waking occasionally to marvel at the mutating landscape, from the lurid sexiness of KZN to the Western Cape's parched beauty and perched shacks.

'We stop at Qunu for lunch. In the biting cold, a small child and some famous philosophers dive down Mandela's sliding rock, forwards, backwards, singly, in pairs, in groups, shrieking, giggling. The sun sets golden through the window of the Mandela centre while people talk about what Madiba meant, or means, to them. Sarah reads a poem that pretty much explains everything but I feel like I need to speak anyway, so I say something vague and unformed about white people claiming Mandela, our casual denial of history and complicity. I'm trying to voice my discomfort with my comfort but it fails to make me any less comfortable.

'We shiver our way back to the bus, where Jorge's prized white scarf is sacrificed to a bottle of red wine.

We arrive in Ginsburg at 10pm, in the dark, singing Let It Be in shaky three-part harmony, lulled by Kirk's unexpected baritone.

'Day 9. The streets in King Williams' Town are oddly empty but the streets in Ginsburg are full of people. The bridge between them bows under the weight of historical graffiti. Fredo thinks that the Biko Centre is built close to the boundary so white people will come; I think it was put there so white people would finally have to look at Ginsburg.

'For someone so full of opinions, I'm not saying much. Am I processing? Resisting? Maybe I can't keep up. Maybe it's all been said by someone else. Maybe I'm just tired.

'Day 10. I'm in a hotel room in Knysna. I haven't been to Knysna since I was an undergrad. The surfers and white boy dreadlocks have been overwhelmed by high end estate agents. I leave dinner early and go to bed with a novel: *Saracen at the Gates*. It makes me briefly homesick.

'Day 11. As we round Sir Lowry's Pass, I snap two guitar strings. No more music.

'I stop writing when we get to Cape Town. I recognise Cape Town.'

A few months after the end of the JWTC and the landscape of my life at Wits has changed. There are new people, new conversations and new arguments. Friends who weren't on The Bus either roll their eyes at any mention of it or endlessly ask for details. The rest of us are like weary expats, tired of talking about it. So many ripples.

I started putting this piece together in a sweaty guest house in Accra; I'm finishing it in an air-conditioned hotel room in Sao Paolo, where the people I'm most excited to see were acquired on the bus trip. These are the places that my job takes me to, alongside Swaziland, Durban, Ginsburg, Cape Town. I am an extremely fortunate woman. When I think back to the JWTC the things that stick with me most powerfully are musical. Roberta on stage with the house band at the Rainbow Room. Songs sung in groups at the back of the bus. The wonderful Ginsburg kids who performed, magnificently, with Neo. I think about these moments, I think about everything that we said about race, justice and inequality, I think about my own position - yes, okay, let's just name it, my own privilege - and I find myself wondering whether academia is really ever enough.