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## “It’s All About the Body”: The Bodily Capital of Armed Response Officers in South Africa

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In this article, I analyze the role of bodily capital in the daily policing practices of armed response officers, a specific type of private security officers, in Durban, South Africa. Based on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that the masculinized bodily capital of armed response officers is a key source of their sovereign power; it plays a central role in how they acquire and exert authority. Furthermore, I argue that an analysis of bodily capital should not solely analyze the actual flesh of the body, but must include particular equipment (such as bulletproof vests and firearms) that is experienced as a part of the body.

**Keywords** *bodily capital, private security, policing, South Africa, sovereignty, violence*

In December 2008, I was on night shift with Nicholas,<sup>1</sup> an Indian armed response officer in his mid-30s.<sup>2</sup> Just as we thought the shift was about to end, we received notification that a panic button had been set off at a nearby gas station. Nicholas slammed on the gas pedal to reach the site as soon as possible. While driving, I observed Nicholas’s excitement, and when I asked him about it, he explained that he assumed this was not a false alarm, but a ‘positive,’ because this gas station had been burgled many times before.

When we arrived at the gas station a few minutes later, Lionel, one of Nicholas’s colleagues, was already at the scene, talking to a black man on the road adjacent to the gas station. The man in question was intoxicated, I saw; he was having difficulty standing up straight and his speech was slurred. He was angry with the clerk of the gas station for refusing to sell him cigarettes and he refused to leave the premises. Although he was not physically threatening, he was screaming at us and was angry with Lionel for trying to make him leave. At one point, he yelled at us, saying,

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“I am standing on public property! If you want me to go, you will have to call the police. I am just standing here and not harming anyone. You have no right to tell me what to do!”

Lionel and Nicholas were initially calm; they steadily asked the man to move down the road to wait for a taxi, so that he would not disturb the client—the employee at the gas station. As the man continued to yell at us, however, Lionel and Nicholas increasingly became impatient and frustrated. Nicholas then approached the man and used hand gestures to urge him to walk further down the road. The man pushed Nicholas, and enraged, Nicholas aggressively shoved him away. Lionel quickly assisted Nicholas and together they grabbed the man by his shoulders and arms, picked him up, and dropped him further down the road. Lionel then screamed at him, “Now stay here. If we see you come any closer, we will not be so nice again!” As he said this, he grabbed onto his vest and pointed at his gun. The man seemed to have understood the message: he got up off the ground, walked further down the road, and got into a taxi a few minutes later.

After the man left, Nicholas and Lionel quickly calmed down and started joking about the man’s drunken behavior. Nicholas then said to me, as a means of explaining his behavior, “I don’t really like telling guys like this to fuck off, but we have to serve our client. But when he touched me, when he placed his hands on me, I jilted. Then he went too far.” Lionel nodded. After a small discussion with Lionel about the night shift, the sun started to come up and Nicholas dropped me off at home.

This incident was one of many I witnessed during the 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in the city of Durban, South Africa, between 2007 and 2010, to analyze the policing practices of armed response officers such as Nicholas and Lionel. Armed response officers are private security officers who work in the armed response sector, a component of the private security industry in South Africa. They are armed private security officers who patrol communities in vehicles and respond to triggers such as alarms and panic buttons installed on clients’ premises. In the incident with Nicholas and Lionel, we see how two armed response officers used both physical force and the threat of further force to deny access to a citizen and thereby instill a certain type of social order.

Like other anthropological studies on policing in South Africa (Buur 2005; Hansen 2006; Jensen 2005), I define such policing practices as performances of sovereignty in which armed response officers claim authority over another body through both their ability to use violence and the actual use of it. In this article, I will expand on the anthropological work on sovereignty (in South Africa and elsewhere) by exploring the role of the bodies of armed response officers and make two central claims. My first claim is that the armed response sector comprises masculinized ‘bodily capital’ (Hobbs et al. 2002; Wacquant 1995) that is geared toward the use of violence. My second claim is that an analysis of bodily capital must incorporate how particular equipment (such as firearms and bulletproof vests) is experienced as part of the body. Bodily capital does therefore not only concern the actual flesh of the bodies, but includes particular embodied objects. In this article, I therefore combine ideas from various fields of anthropology (anthropology of the state, security anthropology, and cyborg anthropology) to intersect with medical anthropology, in order to show how the bodies of armed response officers are shaped towards the use of violence, that is, the ability to claim sovereign power.

I begin with a contextual introduction of the private security industry in South Africa, some generalizations of armed response officers, and my methodology. In the second section, I present my conceptualization of sovereign power and the centrality of violence therein. In the third section, I analyze the masculinized nature of the bodily capital of armed response officers. In the

fourth section, I employ ideas from cyborg anthropology to show how armed response officers experiences particular objects as a part of their body, how this is commodified by companies, and the crucial role this plays in formulating their symbolic authority. In the final section, I make some concluding remarks about what this means both for violence and security in South Africa and for medical anthropology.

## PRIVATE SECURITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is known for its high rates of criminal violence, so high that Anthony Altbeker (2007), a South African criminologist, has referred to it in his book title as “a country at war with itself.” South Africa is ranked 8th on the list of countries with average annual violent death rates of more than 30 per 100,000, and has the second highest murder rate in the African continent (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2011).

A corollary of this ‘culture of violence’ (Altbeker 2007; Kynoch 2005) is the prominence and abundance of nonstate policing. Neighborhood watches, private security companies, citizen patrols, vigilante groups, gangs, street committees, business associations, and other collective initiatives make up South Africa’s policing plethora. The private security industry is unquestionably the leading player among this wide array of organized groups, and South Africa is globally regarded as the “absolute ‘champion’ in the security industry” (De Waard 1999:169). The country currently has the largest private security sector in the world, valued at approximately 2% of the country’s total Gross Domestic Product (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011; Singh 2008). In 2013, there were 9031 registered private security providers, categorized into 20 different types of security services by the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (PSIRA), the quasi-state body that regulates the industry (PSIRA 2012–2013).<sup>3</sup>

The industry originated in the mining sector, entered the urban centers in the 1970s, and exploded at the height of political resistance in the late 1980s. As resistance against the apartheid regime intensified, the South African Police required additional human resources; much of this came from the crime prevention sector, in which particular state policing tasks were outsourced to the private security sector. In the armed response sector, two different types of companies emerged in the 1980s to take on these tasks—‘techies’ and ‘one-man shows.’ The ‘techies’ were companies that installed alarms for commercial businesses and focused on the technical domain of armed reaction. The ‘one-man shows’ comprised ex-policemen or ex-military soldiers who, using their own vehicles and firearms, provided security to a handful of clients. By the end of the 1980s, armed response was a well-established service and existed in both forms—the ‘techies’ and ‘one-man shows.’<sup>4</sup>

During South Africa’s political transition (1990–1994), the armed response sector—and the entire private security industry—experienced its largest economic boom. Many citizens feared the consequences of the national elections of 1994 and demanded immediate protection, which the private security industry readily provided (Shaw 2002). By the mid-1990s, armed response companies were everywhere, and as a white former owner of an armed response company explained, “there was virtually a different armed reaction company on every street corner.” Since 1994, the sector, like the rest of the security industry, has continued to grow, and it is expected to continue to do so, particularly due to further technological advancements. In addition to this growth, the industry has transformed from a “club to a business” (Singh 2008:43) during the past two decades.

While state support was previously obtained by framing security in terms of state sovereignty, it is now obtained by marketing security as a commodity.

Amid this vast and diverse industry, I focused on the armed response sector, comprising 2759 registered companies (PSIRA 2012–2013). Specifically, I analyzed the daily policing practices of armed response officers—the individuals who provide armed reaction services on the ground. I spent a total of 20 months in Durban between 2007 and 2010, using an array of qualitative methods, including in-depth and semi-structured interviews, life histories, and focus group discussions. Yet the bulk of my data stemmed from detailed participant observation, accompanying armed response officers in their vehicles during their 12-hour shifts. In order to reflect the diversity of the industry, I selected four companies for in-depth analysis. The first is an internationally owned company that operates globally and the second company operates solely in Durban. The third and fourth are community-based companies: one operates in an affluent, predominantly white area, while the other operates in a former Indian township on the outskirts of the city.

Early in my research, I accompanied numerous armed response offices in their vehicles, with a different officer for each shift, and sometimes even in several vehicles during the same shift. As time passed, however, I increasingly accompanied the same few individuals. Of the dozens of armed response officers with whom I spoke, I developed close relationships with ten individuals spread across the four companies. In a city marked by decades of racial segregation and currently accounting for a population of more than three million people (Marx and Charlton 2003), the policing practices varied across communities. Furthermore, there were unquestionably differences between the companies and the armed response officers themselves. Here, however, although security in any South African city or neighborhood is marked by unique historical and demographic trajectories resulting in different performances of security, I highlight particular features that can be generalized across the sector.

The first generalization is that armed response officers are between 20 and 40 years old. According to PSIRA regulations, all private security officers must be at least 18 years old. In the armed response sector, the minimum age for officers is 21 years due to legal stipulations regarding the use of firearms, as outlined in the Firearms Control Act 60 of 2000 (Berg 2003:190). The second generalization is that most armed response officers can best be described as ‘wanna-be policemen,’ a description that is assigned to them by the general public and a means in which they describe themselves.<sup>5</sup> Working as a security officer is an opportunity to gain the experience and expertise necessary for eventual employment in a public law enforcement division (Button 2007; Rigakos 2002), and the majority of the armed response officers I met during my time in Durban initially wanted to be policemen.<sup>6</sup> Kenny, an Indian armed response officer in his early 40s, explained to me:

Ever since I was a child, I wanted to be a police officer. I always loved the action, you know, fighting and catching the bad guys. I tried to enter the force, but it didn't work. . . . So I became armed reaction. It's not the same, but it's close. It was the closest thing at the time. I still feel like I'm experiencing that thrill, you know. And that I'm helping people, that I'm doing my part to fight crime and protecting people from the bad guys.

The third generalization is that most armed response officers in South Africa are nonwhite. Despite efforts to address racial imbalances in the private security over the past two decades, whites continue to dominate the higher positions and security officers are still predominantly

nonwhite (Abrahamsen and Williams 2007; Singh 2008); as one white company owner succinctly explained: “Whites on top and blacks at the bottom.”

Race also plays a key role in distinguishing management from operations, although armed reaction is perhaps the most racially diverse sector of the industry. The majority of armed reaction officers are nonwhite (and particularly Indian due to Durban’s large Indian community), but one is more likely to encounter a white armed reaction officer than a white security guard. In 2009, the racial composition of a large company was 51% Indian, 33% black, 8.3% colored, and 7.7% white. Most members of the industry would regard this as very diverse; the majority of companies have armed response personnel who are 90%–95% black or Indian. This diversity is for historical reasons: there were very few nonwhite armed actions officers prior to 1994, as almost all of the ‘one-man shows’ established in the late 1980s were white, ex-police officers. The armed reaction sector was thus initially a completely white domain in terms of both management and operations. This changed in the mid-1990s, when, as one white company owner explained, it became:

. . . difficult to find good white guys. Before, they were coming from the police, but now, with armed reaction earning less, this wasn’t happening. . . . So around then, you saw blacks and Indians coming in, particularly blacks . . . it was difficult to find a good white reaction guy. And it still is. They’re an absolute minority. It’s turned around.

In the armed response sector, therefore, there has been a shift in the performers from white male bodies to nonwhite male bodies. Elsewhere, I discuss the importance of race and the prevalence of inter-racial stereotyping and racial profiling in the occupational culture of armed response (Diphoorn 2015). Here I want to emphasize that although race is essential to their line of work, armed response officers share an understanding of their work that moves beyond race. When asked which skills and attributes are essential to be a ‘good’ armed reaction officer, a link was always made to violence, danger, toughness, and other masculine attributes.

This ties into the fourth generalization: all armed response officers are men, and I did not encounter a single female armed reaction officer. Managers repeatedly stated that they have a strict policy of not employing women for such positions. One company owner informed me that he had employed a female armed reaction officer in the past, but that he let her go as he had felt that he could not guarantee her safety. Women are a minority in the private security industry worldwide and attributes perceived to be feminine are restrained, discouraged, or even penalized (Button 2007; Rigakos 2002). When I asked my informants about female armed reaction officers, they laughed and joked about the prospect of women doing their line of work (see also Rigakos 2002:83). A few of my informants recalled two women who had worked as armed reaction officers in the past, but they were not regarded as ‘real women’ because they were ‘butch,’ lesbian, and possessed what were considered to be male characteristics. For many informants, the mere notion of female armed reaction officers upsets gender categories, as women should not perform security-related duties, such as climbing over fences, handling firearms, and chasing suspects.

Therefore, although masculinity is a socially constructed concept (Joachim and Schneiker 2012), it plays a large role in the way the security industry portrays itself to the public and among its constituents. Like the military (Masters 2005; Sasson-Levy 2002) and the state police (Brown 2007; Monaghan 2002, 2003; Reiner 2000; Westmarland 2001), the occupational culture of private security is masculinized. Activities associated with policing and security automatically imply a sense of protection and a need to provide safety; particular characteristics, such as physical strength, courage, and aggression, are widely regarded as masculine (Brown 2007; Higate

2012; Monaghan 2002, 2003; Reiner 2000; Westmarland 2001). As I discuss later, the predominance of masculinities shapes how the bodily capital of armed response officers is cultivated, and it is essential to the fifth generalization: the bodies of armed response officers are geared for a particular purpose, that is, the ability to use violence and thereby claim sovereign power.

## POLICING AS THE PERFORMANCE OF SOVEREIGN POWER

In this article, I follow other anthropological researchers on policing in South Africa (Buur 2005; Hansen 2006; Jensen 2005) and conceptualize policing bodies as sovereign bodies. Anthropological studies on sovereignty have increased in the past decade, shifting the focus on legal sovereignty—“sovereignty grounded in formal ideologies of rules and legality”—toward an analysis of *de facto* sovereignty, “the ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity wherever it is found and practiced” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006:296). From an anthropological perspective, *de facto* sovereignty is generally understood as a socially constructed source of power, reproduced through daily practices and repetitious public performances. Sovereignty is not a fixed form of power, but “an unstable and precarious form of power” (Hansen 2005:171) that must be habitually revoked. Sovereign power is not something that simply exists to be possessed or executed, but is a form of authority that must be habitually claimed and re-claimed through “exercises of sovereignty” (Sieder 2011:163). I therefore regard claims to sovereignty as performances; they are not single acts or deeds, but consist of numerous practices that are part of a larger social process (Turner 1982:91). Although they involve a set of preestablished sequences, they are also flexible, capable of changing, and very often shaped by improvisation.

I employ Hansen and Stepputat’s (2006:297) definition of (*de facto*) sovereignty as a “tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy from the neighborhood to the summit of the state.” The state is therefore not the sole sovereign body; rather, “multiple sovereignties” (Bertelsen 2009) are found within and across states. This is particularly the case for the postcolonial world that has always been marked by fragmented forms of sovereignty (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Hansen and Stepputat 2005). This definition includes claims to sovereignty that are based on the ability to instill punishment and to do so through violence; violence is the source of sovereign power. *De facto* sovereign power is therefore not inherently linked to control over a particular territory, but over the body (Das and Poole 2004; Hansen and Stepputat 2006), enforced through violence. The incident with Nicholas and Lionel in the introduction is such a performance: they claimed sovereign power by employing physical force and threatening further violence if the man in question did not comply.

Although other scholars have argued that private security officers rely less on coercive tools and use less physical force than the state police (Mopas and Stenning 2001; Stenning 2000), coercion and violence are essential parts of the occupational culture of armed response. Like the work of Winlow and colleagues (2001:537) on bouncers, I argue that the occupational culture of armed response is one “created around violence and violent expectation.” This does not mean that one encounters or employs violence on a daily basis, but that the risk of danger is ever present for armed response officers and shapes their daily lives and fears; violence, verbal abuse, and intimidation are frequent occurrences (Button 2007; Rigakos 2002). As the first line of duty, reaction officers are usually first to attend a crime scene. A police reservist mentioned to me that armed



reaction officers were the “cannon fodder” of the policing business; other informants supported this description. The main risk for reaction officers is becoming victims of crime themselves, particularly since they possess firearms, which because these are high demand, make them an attractive target for criminals.

“Force capital,” the “ability to deploy or threaten to deploy force across space” (Martin 2013: 53), is essential in the armed response sector. Force capital includes physical resources, such as personnel and weaponry, and nonphysical resources, such as training and reputation, and is employed both directly through the use of physical force, and indirectly such as through intimidation. In the following discussion, I focus on the physical resources, namely the bodies of armed response officers, and analyze this through the concept of ‘bodily capital.’

### BODILY CAPITAL

According to Monaghan (2002), bodily capital comprises two factors: the body build of an individual, that is, his or her physical appearance, and “techniques of the body” (Mauss 1973, in Monaghan 2002:337)—the ability to use the body. In their study on the powers of bouncers, Hobbs and colleagues (2002) examined their ‘bodily capital’ and analyzed how this was used to enhance their ability to use force to deny access. Bouncers cultivated an intimidating and authoritative appearance to perform their duties and thereby underline their position of “authority and dominance within the milieu” (Hobbs et al. 2002:357). As I illustrate, the bodily capital of armed response officers is also geared toward creating an intimidating appearance to ensure compliance and acquire authority.

The armed reaction sector, and arguably the industry as a whole, is characterized by a dominant macho subculture where masculine attributes are glorified and rewarded. There is an ongoing process of ‘masculinization,’ a “strategy to affirm superiority . . . by drawing on what are considered accepted and desirable male attributes” (Joachim and Schneiker 2012:498). If armed response officers possess and display particular masculine attributes, they are praised and rewarded. For many of my informants, armed response work appeared to provide a space in which to exert and emphasize masculine attributes that might need to be minimized or concealed in their private lives. When I asked them what they enjoyed about their work, common responses included “here I can be a man” and “here there are no women telling me what to do.” On duty, armed reaction officers continuously compete among each other to demonstrate their strength and toughness; cars, guns, and women were the main topics of social conversation.

Inherent to the ‘wanna-be policemen’ label, armed response officers are often described as being ‘trigger-happy’ and ‘thrill-seekers.’ Although this does not apply to all armed reaction officers, this reputation is not entirely unwarranted. Like the public police (Chan 2007), armed reaction officers often see danger as a perk of the job. Many become ‘addicted’ to the action and adrenaline, and regret missing out if a crime occurs during their days off. Some of my informants also had an overt passion for physically apprehending and reprimanding suspects, and many were not shy about expressing their enthusiasm for getting into fights. Armed reaction officers sometimes appeared to provoke violence in order to have some “action for the day”; they would commonly remark: “I want some fresh meat today,” “Today can’t be another hit-free day,” and “Let’s go loiter and stir so we can hit someone.” These sentiments, I suggest, cannot be disentangled from the larger processes of masculinization in the armed response sector. Companies



often operate as “masculinity multipliers” (Joachim and Schneiker 2012:507), in which both managers and response officers reproduce masculinities. Masculinities are also reproduced by fostering a particular type of ‘bodily capital’ (Wacquant 1995). As Monaghan (2003:21) noted, “(g)endered constructions of occupational competence, which are implicated in individual and collective preservation, are thoroughly embodied.”

In recruitment procedure, armed response managers and owners prefer to recruit physically big men who are strongly built. When I asked an armed response manager what he looked out for when recruiting a new officer, he stated:

I look at several things, of course. Training, experience, which company he’s been with before, how he talks, handles himself, that kinda shit. But I also make sure he looks good; clean, fit, and strong. That he not only looks professional, but that he can run, that he’s still got it. At the end of the day, it’s all about the body.

Many armed response officers regard their body as their most important asset for their work. Although they value the importance of their training, manner of speech, and communication skills, they all emphasized that essentially, their physical body “gets the job done.” Although not as extreme or passionate as the boxers in Wacquant’s (1995) study, armed response officers are aware that their body provides them with an income to support their families; it is their prime “marketable asset” (Winlow et al. 2001:540). Similarly, they realize that their body is at risk when they are at work. In the introductory incident, Nicholas described how he “jilted” when the man in question “touched” him and “placed his hands” on him. He experienced this physical contact as a direct attack on his body. Given the constant dangers of this type of employment, armed response officers feel constantly at risk, and due to the violent nature of crime in South Africa (Altbeker 2007; Shaw 2002), an attack can quickly be very serious.

Yet, unlike the informants from the studies of Hobbs and colleagues (2002) and Monaghan (2002), most armed response officers are not especially fit physically. Often my informants failed to catch a suspect due to their poor fitness levels. Most armed response officers with whom I spoke were heavy smokers and several of them drank alcohol regularly. In addition, the nature of the occupation requires them to patrol in their vehicles all day and does not, therefore, demand a lot of physical exercise. Although some visited the gym regularly, this was not common. The ‘bodily capital’ of armed response officers does not therefore primarily rest on the physical strength of their bodies.

Nevertheless, many armed response officers boast about their fighting skills, their ‘techniques of the body,’ the second factor that shapes bodily capital (Mauss 1973, in Monaghan 2002). In May 2010, I observed how a group of armed response officers, operating very much in Goffman’s (1959) understanding of a ‘team,’ apprehended two suspects, and proceeded to interrogate and beat them.<sup>7</sup> During this process, the armed response officers were palpably showing off and boasting about their skills. They teased and provoked one another, showing each other how they can hit and kick suspects. However, the most valued ‘technique’ among armed response officers was their shooting skills, those who could not shoot properly were not ‘real men’ or ‘good’ armed response officers. During one interview, an Indian security company owner described how he recruited armed response officers based on their ability to fight and shoot:

In this work, you gotta know how to fight, how to hit hard. You can’t be fragile, too kind or sensitive. They [armed response officers] won’t survive. No matter what their past or background is—if they

have passion and are ready to do the hard work, I'll employ them. And you have to be able to use this [points at gun]. If you can't fire this properly, then you're out.

### BEYOND THE BODY: INCORPORATING "MY GEAR"

The previous quote highlights the value placed upon a particular technique (shooting), and shows the value of an object—the firearm. Such statements lead to my second central claim—that particular objects, often referred to by as armed response officers as “my gear,” play a crucial role in their daily work. In this section, I show how gear is embodied (experienced as a part of their bodies), and the fundamental role it plays in acquiring authority. In the armed response sector, actual physical bodies are not necessarily most important, but the range of equipment that they experience as part of their body is important.

To make this claim, I draw from the field of ‘cyborg anthropology.’ Although a wide and diverse field, cyborg anthropology “takes the relations among knowledge production, technological production, and subject production to be a crucial area of anthropological research” (Downey, Dumit, and Williams 1995:264). Studies within this field analyze relationships between humans and machines, illustrating how technology is meaningful for our human lives. When policing the streets of Durban, armed response officers are continuously interacting with objects and machines. They drive around in a vehicle with GPS (or some form of tracking system) and continuously use a radio to communicate with their colleagues. They respond to a range of triggers that derive from technological systems, such as panic buttons and alarm systems. And they physically wear equipment, such as uniforms, bulletproof vests, radios, and firearms—“my gear.” Like many health professions, objects and technologies therefore play a prominent role in their occupation.

This is particularly so when we see that armed response officers themselves perceive their uniforms, vests, and firearms as parts of their body when on duty: they are embodied objects. One example is Siphon, a black armed response officer in his 30s, who explained to me how he felt when putting on his uniform:

Before a shift, when I get ready, I take my time to get dressed. Everything is washed, ironed and neat. And I put my clothes on slowly. Many times I look at the mirror when I do this, to make sure I do it right, sharp. And it gets me ready for work, gets me prepared. The end is the most important, when I put on the vest. I used to hate this vest; in the beginning, *ish*, it was heavy. But now I don't even notice. And on the job, it is a part of me. You can't do this job without it.

Siphon was known among his colleagues as someone who took pride in his work and as one of his colleagues called it, was quite “anal” about his appearance. Yet many armed response officers, like Siphon, described the vest as being a “part” of them. Although many also complained about the weight of vest, particularly during summer, they more often narrated how the vest made them feel safe and more confident in their work, and they treated it with enormous care.

Similar sentiments were expressed about their firearms. In the armed response sector, companies possess firearm permits for the officers and armed response officers receive their firearm at the start of their duty during shift change. Although forbidden, many also carry their own personal firearm while on duty. One example is Sanjeev, an Indian armed response officer in his 40s, who always had his personal firearm stowed in his bag in the trunk of the vehicle. During one of our first shifts together in November 2008, we were having lunch in the vehicle in a park.

After we ate, he got out his firearm and wanted to teach me how to dismantle it. Although I had held a firearm before, and had used it during firearm training, I started to feel very nervous and uncomfortable. My heart started to race, I began to sweat, and slightly stutter. Sanjeev noticed this and repeatedly reassured me that everything was safe. Even more so, he kept reiterating that it was essential for me to know this, because

This [firearm] is a part of this job. If you want to understand what we do, you need to know these details. I can dismantle a firearm and put it back in together in just a few minutes, without even thinking about it. This thing [the firearm] is our weapon here, it's what keeps me alive and the other guy dead. So you need to know. This thing [he holds the firearm attached to his own vest] is what keeps me alive; it's right here, on me, always.

Sanjeev highlighted the value he places on his firearm for his own safety from others. His use of the words “on me, always,” and continuously pointing at it and holding it, signal a sensation of feeling and embodiment. Like the bulletproof vest, many armed response officers describe their firearm as a “part of” their body, as an “attachment” to themselves. It was common for armed response officers to frequently touch or rest their hand on the part of the vest where the firearm was located, as a means of reassuring themselves that it was there. Several studies on the military (Lande 2007) show how bodies take on new meanings during military training, particularly how bodies transform into weapons. This also occurs in the reverse, namely weapons and other gear acquire new meanings when they are experienced as being part of the body.

These sentiments of ‘attachment’ are similar to feelings echoed with regards to prosthetics, regarded as replacements, extensions, or additions to human bodies (Smith and Morra 2006). Like glasses, replacement legs, or other objects, bulletproof vests and firearms also function to extend the experience and usage of the body. Referring to the idea of “prosthetic relationality” (Nelson 2001:305), the bodies of armed response officers change when they put on the bulletproof vest or hold and point towards their firearm. As Nelson suggests, “The body changes through its articulation with the prosthetic which must be *incorporated* by the body that relies on it via what neurophysiology and psychoanalysis call the body image” (2001:305, italics in original).

Given this, an analysis of bodily capital must incorporate particular relations, articulations, and feelings of belonging expressed and experienced by armed response officers with their gear. Firearms, bulletproof vests, and a range of other ‘objects’ are a part of the ‘body image’ of armed response officers (Grosz 1994:80, in Nelson 2001:306). Such equipment must therefore also be included when analyzing ‘techniques of the body.’ Shooting is not simply a technique; it entails a relationship between an armed response officer and his firearm.

In addition, the ‘gear’ of armed response officers is essential to their authority and legitimacy. In the literature on private security, one of main points of discussion is the legal rights and powers of private security officers (Button 2007; Joh 2005). With a few exceptions, security officers worldwide do not generally possess powers beyond those of ordinary citizens. In South Africa, the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 allows security officers only to utilize powers granted to ‘private persons’ (Singh 2008). However, the rights bestowed upon citizens in South Africa are “far-reaching” when compared to international standards, since these rights were conceived during the apartheid era, when citizens were granted powers “to defend the state against threats to its sovereignty” (Singh 2008:50).

Yet armed response officers primarily rely on other ‘tools of the trade,’ namely institutional, physical, personal, and symbolic ones (Button 2007; Stenning 2000) to acquire authority. Like

the public police (Loader 1997), private security officers obtain authority by utilizing symbolic devices such as uniforms and equipment; indeed Stenning argues that private security officers make more use of symbolic power than the public police, as they “are much less closely oriented towards, and reliant upon, the formal criminal justice system” (2000:334). By driving in marked vehicles, wearing customized badges and uniforms, and possessing a firearm, officers exhibit symbolic authority that ensures compliance. The possession of firearms, in particular, signals this authority and the powers that accompany it (Button 2007:11). Referring back to the incident with Nicholas and Lionel, Lionel “grabbed onto his vest and pointed at his gun” as a means of intimidation, to show who was in charge, and therefore placed himself as the authoritative figure at that moment.

For this reason, companies heavily invest in how they promote their company and the physical appearance of armed response officers, such as the type of vehicles they drive in and the color of their uniforms. Companies take the physical appearance and attire of their armed response officers very seriously, and armed response officers are (financially) penalized when they do not wear their full gear. Rigakos (2002) highlights how the companies in his study in Canada emphasized the physical appearance of private security officers, who are instructed to be clean-shaven and to wear an ironed uniform and shiny boots in order to command respect. Company owners regard strictness with regards to uniforms and physical attire to be important in order to maintain their companies’ reputation and client approval, but it also instills a strong sense of bodily discipline, authority, and hierarchy. This is so for armed response officers, whose entire appearance was contrived to exude influence and authority. The white owner of a guarding company referred to private security officers as “ambassadors of the industry,” offering the following explication:

The guards are the first thing a customer sees, so he has to look professional, neat, and smart. We have to invest in that, because it’s what clients see first. Of course we want to help him economically, but it’s in our own interest to invest in his wellbeing for marketing purposes.

Generally, the industry in South Africa promotes itself in two ways. Several companies brand themselves with militaristic symbols and emphasize that their armed response officers are tough and strong, not afraid to use violence if necessary. Figure 1 depicts three armed response officers from Reaction Unit South Africa (RUSA), a community-based company. In choosing the esthetics for their company, the owners sought to project a militaristic image of a ‘tough force’ of men. The armed reaction officers are dressed head to toe in black, and in addition to the standard equipment (radio, firearm, and bulletproof vest), they must wear army chains, kneepads, bandannas, and black sunglasses. Although such companies do not promote violence as policy, its use in ‘getting the job done’ is generally encouraged. As another white owner of a small company explained, “I encourage my guys to shoot. If they’re being threatened or their lives are in any form of danger, they must shoot. It’s an order.”

The second type of image promoted by security firms is geared toward ‘community orientation.’ These companies take a stance away from the militaristic image, which is often associated with apartheid-style policing ways when companies generally tended to augment their military skills and policing expertise. Since the 1990s, many companies have re-branded themselves from a military-style force into ‘community policing groups.’ In Figure 2, the three armed response officers from BLUE Security standing in front of a vehicle.

BLUE Security made this shift in order to present its armed response officers as a ‘professional force’ of employees. Marketing employees told me that they had invested a lot of time in choosing



FIGURE 1 Three armed response officers from RUSA (photo taken by the author).



FIGURE 2 Three armed response officers from BLUE (photo taken by the author).



imagery and symbols from American cop shows to represent their company, thus the choice of blue and ‘soft colors,’ rather than black and ‘hard’ colors.

Company owners recognize the central role that physical attributes play in ensuring compliance and exuding authority, and they invest in the bodies of their employees, further highlighting how bodies are commodified. When analyzing the bodies of armed response officers, we should thus take a step further with “body fragmentation” (Sharp 2000:287) and not only analyze the actual flesh of the body, but include the attire that is placed on their bodies, including, in this case, bulletproof vests and firearms.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In analyzing the bodily capital of armed response offices in Durban, South Africa, I have made two central claims. The first is that bodily capital is perhaps the most vital factor that allows armed response officers to use violence, or to exude an ability to do so. Anthropological studies on (de facto) sovereignty have identified violence as the source of power, and in this article, I have demonstrated that the cultivation of masculinized bodily capital is key to this use of violence; it is the source of the source, so to speak. I thereby contribute to the anthropological work on sovereignty by focusing on the bodies of policing agents. Referring back to the incident with Nicholas and Lionel, it was their ability to use force, cultivated in their bodily capital, by which the drunken man eventually adhered to their commands. This does not mean that violence is always used, but that their policing practices center on their ability to use force. In the armed response sector, bodily capital is cultivated for this prime objective.

My second claim is that we must include particular objects that are literally placed onto the body when analyzing bodily capital. Drawing from cyborg anthropology and contributing to medical anthropology, I have demonstrated how armed response officers experience parts of their ‘gear,’ particularly bulletproof vests and firearms, as a part of their body. In my research, armed response officers are very reliant on such equipment to ensure their own safety and to acquire (symbolic) authority amidst violent circumstances. The bodily capital of armed response officers is thus their most important ‘tool of the trade.’

For this reason, companies heavily invest in the design of the physical appearance of armed response officers. Some companies aim to exude a more ‘professional’ force consisting of ‘community policing bodies,’ while other companies exert a more militaristic image with ‘tough’ men. This disparity reflects a contestation in South Africa about the rightful place of violence in policing. Postapartheid state policing intended to eradicate the oppressive practices and reputation of the state police, yet recent developments, such as the much debated ‘shoot to kill’ policy, which proposed to provide police officers with more power to employ lethal force when affecting an arrest, suggest a return to calls for more militant and repressive policing practices. And as the private security industry in South Africa is expected to grow, policing practices centered on violence are only likely to be institutionalized further.

In a similar way, the accoutrements of other professionals—including health professionals—instill power and authority. Stethoscopes as traditionally worn around the neck by doctors, specific clothing, gloves, thermometers, and other portable devices, all symbolize the authoritative knowledge and power of health professionals while serving practical functions. Professionals in any society employ objects and technologies related to the body as integral to their identity

and their capacity to act. Yet these technologies confine as well as empower, limiting the range of activities and the fields of legitimate action of those who employ them.

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## NOTES

1. All of the names used in this article are pseudonyms in order to uphold the anonymity of my informants.
2. Armed response is also referred to as armed reaction, and I use these terms interchangeably.
3. I retrieved PSIRA’s annual reports from the website <http://www.psira.co.za>.
4. Several companies were created through a fusion of the two.
5. This ‘wanna-be policemen’ label does not apply to all private security officers in South Africa, but particularly to the armed response sector. For further information, see Diphorn (2015).
6. This also strongly influences their relationship with state police officers, which is both competitive and collaborative. For more information, see Diphorn and Berg (2014).
7. For more information regarding this incident, see Diphorn (2013).

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