

“They’re coming, people are coming...so we ran, we picked up our things and we ran”

Imogen Kropf, a social anthropology student from SOAS University who, in September 2019, found herself in the middle of riots in Johannesburg, stemming from the murder of a taxi driver.

by Grace Dembowicz (Intended for: The Guardian)

I arrived at Johannesburg on Sunday 1st September, I had got to my hostel in a place called Maboneng, a slightly gentrified district that has a very big arts community, next to Jeppestown. I was supposed to be doing research for my dissertation and I had been due to meet my friend before, but I couldn’t get hold of him so I sat having a drink outside the hostel.

My friend whom I was meeting, happened to be walking past, he suggested going back to his place as there were other people wanting to see me, we chilled out, had some beers, played some pool, and went around people’s flats listening to music and dancing. It was getting late so I suggested heading home. I planned on getting an Uber but my friend, James, was like: “no you need to come meet my girlfriend”. We were sitting in his girlfriend’s flat chatting, when there was a gunshot outside, they both looked at each other and said “oh shit, it’s starting”. I was like: “wait, what is this, what’s starting?” and they said “it’s kicking off, there’s going to be riots”. They explained that there had been talks that people were pissed off that foreigners were coming in and taking their jobs, after an incident occurred where a Nigerian drug dealer had shot a Zoulou taxi driver.

I said “I need to go, I need to go right now”. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t feeling any kind of panic, of course I was. James suggested I stay the night with them, but at this point I wanted to go back, but he wouldn’t let me walk out there. I tried to call an Uber, I would get a ride, and then they would immediately cancel. That happened three times, and then Uber app just went down, I think it’s because they could see where they were picking me up from, especially because it’s often a lot of

foreign nationals that are Uber drivers. I shared a bed with him and his girlfriend, they were lovely and caring. The next day I woke up early and got an Uber home.

The streets were dead, there was no one walking, apart from after gun shots had been fired, then you would see people running into the streets carrying bags, children, trying to knock on doors, trying to get in to somewhere because people felt scared. It was a xenophobic time, but it was such a racialized attack. It made me go: "What the fuck am I doing here? Who do I think I am? Why am I here thinking I can come as BA student, you know, to write a dissertation, to tell a story?"

I ended up meeting a few of the guys that worked on the local market, they had stores on the street selling jewellery and different kinds of African trinkets, the two guys whom I became particularly good friends with were from Zimbabwe. They just couldn't work, we would spend most of our days sitting in one of the houses which was right next to the hostel, behind this locked gate whilst everything was happening. They would set up their stalls and no one would come. Tourists weren't coming and that's who they were dependent on.

A week after it all kicked off, there was an indoor arts and foods market, I'd gone to get some lunch, I had some Ethiopian food. I'd got into this routine, of every morning going down, buying them a coffee, sitting with them until lunchtime, chatting, having a smoke. One day, we were chatting when someone came running down the street shouting "they're coming, people are coming". I dropped my things and helped one of the ladies who had all of her little jewellery, models, bowls, all those kind of things, laid out on these massive tables. All of the venders got together to help each other pack up their stuff. We packed everything up and ran to a storage unit. It was a hair raising moment, I knew I was safe because I was with people who would look out for me.

I enjoyed being able to talk to people and get a sense of what was going on, it helped me learn about the complexity and nuance of post-apartheid in South Africa because this is not the first time this kind of incident has happened and won't be the last.

WORDS: 797