It was Saturday, market day in the nearby town of Supilli. In a rural, somewhat out-of-the-way part of northern Kenya, the Saturday market in the nearby medium-size town is like a party of sorts, where people of many ethnic groups gather, socialize, and perhaps spend a bit of their money from livestock sales on beer and roasted meat—a pleasant change of pace from the routines of my fieldwork.

Sammy (my Samburu assistant), Simba (my Pokot host), and I intended to go to the market, but my car, as was often the case, was not in good repair. It only started some of the time, and when it managed to start, an undiagnosed engine problem was causing it to consume ridiculous amounts of fuel. There was public transportation from the little town of Ol Moran, where we were located, but it was unpleasant, usually involving sitting in the back of a truck on a very rough road. So, when I saw the local councilor—an ethnic Kikuyu who was the political representative from this mixed area—with his old Suzuki jeep, I went over to say hello. I struck up a conversation about his car, which filled me with nostalgia since it was identical in make and color to the one I had driven in the course of my doctoral research. He was friendly, and when I inquired about possibly getting a ride to the market he said he probably could give me one if he got some gas, and we could talk later.
I left him and shortly afterward was standing around with Sammy and Simba. I mentioned getting a lift with the counselor as a better option than driving my problematic car or sitting in the back of a truck. Simba responded with disgust, “Pffft! Stay away from that guy!” It wasn’t the sort of response that elicited further discussion. Clearly there was some sort of basic disgust with the counselor, so the ride was not going to be an option, and parsing out the reasons for the disgust seemed an awkward conversation.

In the end, we went to Supilli in the back of a bumpy truck, then enjoyed the market with its meat and beer and pineapples, and in the evening I was back in Ol Moran, sitting around reading and relaxing with Sammy. Not long after dusk he went out to use the latrine but returned shortly, looking quite startled. He claimed he had heard gunshots, but I dismissed it as him being jumpy, a nervous Samburu in an area now dominated by their enemies, the Pokot. Just minutes later, however, I realized I had been too quick to shrug Sammy off. The night was filled with keening, wailing, whistles, and chanting as groups of Kikuyu townspeople, angry and forlorn, moved through the streets of the town.

The counselor had been killed—shot dead in the Suzuki I did not ride in.

Ethnography is always personal. It is an odd enterprise in which our authority to convey scholarly knowledge to others is dependent on our “being there.” Yet, of course, being there is never a simple thing. As the various iterations of the critique, debate, or exploration of “writing culture” have shown, as much as anthropologists may wish, and at earlier junctures may have claimed, to have our writings serve as objective windows that offer a peek into a reality very different from that of our readers, we are always an integral part of the picture whether we like it or not, and irrespective of the degree to which we acknowledge it or make it a part of our writing. As Borneman and Hammoudi (2009) argue in their thoughtful recent collection on the fieldwork encounter: “Fieldwork encounters . . . are modes of ethical engagement wherein the ethnographer is arrested in the act of perception. This arrest can lead both to a productive doubt about the ongoing perception of the phenomena in interaction and to the possibility of elaborating shared knowledge”
Put another way, as ethnographers, we are at the center of a strange and complex reality that we can never fully understand, inserting ourselves into this strange reality to convey this imperfect understanding of it to others. Our roles are many. Apart from our explicit one as scholars—which in many cases our interlocutors do not fully grasp—we are, as Hortense Powdermaker (1967) famously called us, “strangers and friends.” But we are many other things as well, and our friends (or “research subjects”) may construe us to have a host of additional perceived roles. We may, for instance, be suspected of being spies, a common accusation made against anthropologists (e.g., Jarvenpa 1998)—and, fortunately, only rarely true. In the context of working between warring groups, the possibility of being a spy, or the danger of inadvertently acting as one, was very real. I was careful to avoid this role, and despite obvious concern on the part of different warring groups, I was only rarely and mildly suspected of it. One can also be a target. That’s a role one can only be cautious about but not prevent.

Thus, while ethnography is always personal, I would contend that this ethnography is particularly (though certainly not uniquely) so. I take this to be neither a singular virtue of this text nor a scourge on its validity. It is simply a statement about the way this text was produced and the kind of knowledge it contains: a kind of uncertainty, indeed a certainty of uncertainty. Part of the odd personal nature of this ethnography involved the simple fact of my becoming a kind of conduit between people who never talked, or could once talk but no longer did. Chapter 4, for instance, is to a great extent constituted through the intersection of my conversations with the surviving family of a renowned Somali sheik who was killed by the Samburu, as well as the particular Samburu elder who in his youth drove a spear through their grandfather’s chest. The personal dimensions most central to this multisited fieldwork experience revolved around Simba, both in respect to the complexities of that relationship in its own right, and in the strange and coincidental links it created with Lekeren, my longtime host among the Samburu.

Although I formed friendships in all of the communities where I worked in the course of this particular project, as well as in the Samburu ones that predated it, the relationship with Simba was the most important in many ways. He is funny and extroverted, and we enjoyed each other’s company a great deal. He cuts a charismatic, larger-than-life figure, and
by odd coincidence, his personal connections to the Samburu were aligned with my own, having before the war been the neighbor and friend of my longtime Samburu host, Lekeren. Indeed—as noted in the introduction—after I had begun work among Pokot but before I knew Simba, Lekeren asked me if I had met him, characterizing him as a good-natured extrovert who had before the war been his friend but now was reputed to want to kill him. An odd, additional, and coincidental wrinkle to the relationship is that Simba is also the uncle to a Pokot boy, Tinga, whom Lekeren had semi-adopted years earlier, and whom I therefore knew well—a child my own children had grown up playing with. So while through much of my earlier research a childhood Tinga was a fixture at Lekeren’s home, a teenage Tinga was now a frequent visitor at Simba’s.

Why, when I suggested getting a lift to the market in the councilor’s Suzuki, did my friend tell me, “Keep away from that guy!” accompanied
by an exclamation of disgust? Clearly he did not like the councilor, but
the fact that the man was murdered just hours later in that very car forces
other questions. Putting these in context requires a bit more discussion
of Simba, my relationship to him, and the ways this bore on fieldwork.

Simba and I shared personal connections (albeit ambiguous ones)
through Lekeren and Tinga, as well as genuine affection. We joked and
drank and ate meat together, spending days bicycling around the open
landscapes of Laikipia. I frequently stayed at his settlement, and to ensure
my comfort he bought a thin foam mattress to put atop the traditional
Pokot bed composed of thin sticks, providing additional sheets and blank-
ets to keep me warm. One night he went so far as to tuck me in with
the new bedding—a rather comical experience as a grown man, particu-
larly given Simba’s notable size and reputation as a strong and fierce
Pokot warrior. But irrespective of what felt like genuine friendship,
could I ever be sure of Simba? The region was violent, and Simba was
not a stranger to that. I could never truly know what he was involved
in and what he wasn’t—and therefore I could never exclude the possibil-
ity that what he might or might not be involved in might someday
involve me.

As a general rule, in doing fieldwork I aim to avoid getting particularly
close to those who are regarded as “important people” in the commu-
nity. While some people (anthropologists and others) have a tendency to
gravitate toward important friends, I am generally guided by the recogni-
tion that important friends are likely to have important enemies; by mak-
ing one set of friends, one risks making enemies of others, or at least
suggesting to people that one is aligned with their enemies. While I have
not, as a consequence, always avoided important people—my Samburu
host, for instance, is a person of prominence within his age set and hence
within the community—I have never sought them out, much less delib-
erately fostered the notion that we were tightly bonded and essentially
aligned. Simba is the exception. He is loquacious and fun; once I met
him it would have been difficult not to become friends. But it is also the
case that his area was certainly the most dangerous that I have ever
worked (and at times I had children with me whose safety I needed to
consider), with lots of guns, active warfare characterized by intermittent
fighting between Pokot and Samburu, and common banditry.
I do not know to what extent, if at all, Simba was directly involved in such activities, particularly banditry. However, I was quite sure that he was highly knowledgeable and highly respected—including by people who might at times be bandits. I believed having it be known that I was friends with Simba offered me protection, irrespective of what direct steps he might actually take (unknown to me) to ensure my safety. Still, I was careful. He sometimes asked to borrow significant sums of money, for instance when he found that calves were available at throwaway prices at a livestock market. I would have trusted him with a loan, as he was wealthy and respected. I was, however, mildly paranoid/concerned that he might be trying to determine if I was carrying significant sums of money—perhaps whether I was worth the while of bandits. Regardless of how much money I had, I would give the same answer: I had just enough money to buy gas and a few supplies. And—if not quite to the extreme of a prison or spy movie—I always kept money in three or more different places: my official supply, a secure semihidden supply, and an extra hidden supply (perhaps rolled up in a used prescription bottle)—and perhaps another bit hidden somewhere else. In the uncertainties of fieldwork, I believed that trust in Simba would keep me safe. But I did not believe this enough to not take precautions to keep me safe from Simba.

What, then, about the murder of the councilor? Did Simba have foreknowledge? There are three partially overlapping scenarios that could explain why he told me to have nothing to do with the guy in general, and specifically to rid my mind of hitching a ride in his car. And despite the fact that “I was there,” I can’t offer much guidance on which of these scenarios is true or even most likely. In the most innocent version, he told me to avoid the councilor simply because he (and most likely other Pokot) genuinely disliked him. In this version his dislike is by and large tangential to the fact that other Pokot disliked the councilor enough to kill him (again, in this innocent version, absolutely without my friend’s knowledge). In a slightly less innocent version, my friend was protecting me by telling me to avoid the councilor (and more importantly, the car in which he would be killed). Perhaps Simba knew that he was going to be killed, that he was going to be shot in the car where I was hoping to ride. In the least innocent version, my friend knew that I shouldn’t be in that car because he had something to do with what happened. We may
still interpret it as protecting me, but in this case protecting me from something he had a hand in. How should I know?

What shall we make of the uncertainty of that situation? Of course, it tells us something about the context of fieldwork. I do not, however, intend it principally as the sort of fieldwork adventure story that anthropologists sometimes like to swap with colleagues or share with students. This book isn’t about me. It’s by me: it could not exist but for the fact that “I was there,” and to a certain extent a fair and honest reading of the book and the narratives that principally constitute it need to take account of the uncertainties incumbent in the knowledge that I bring forward. If I do not know why my friend asserted his authority in a way that ensured I did not get shot, I certainly lack the authority to come to definitive conclusions about why, in other scenarios discussed throughout the book, people did get shot. Yet perhaps most importantly, neither do the actors in this book, by and large, know definitively what happened and why it happened—and unlike me, they lack the luxury of being able to get on a plane and fly away. That is to say, uncertainty is central to the texture of the lives of the actors who inhabit this book. Of course some are at times producers of uncertainty—someone knows the truth of what happened in this example and at least some of the others I bring forward, though there may be variations to which the truth may be spun—and they are also consumers of uncertainty. But everyone in this book lives with intense doubt in one sense or another, at one time or another.

In respect to the murder of the councilor, the uncertainties go far beyond why my friend told me to not get into a car that (coincidentally or not) would hours later be sprayed with bullets. The accounts of why it was attacked and by whom are interlocking, conflicting, and unresolved. A semiofficial version was reported in the national media. While acknowledging my limited ability to discern the truth of this situation, I do know that this semiofficial version is almost certainly not true. In the Kenyan national media, the councilor was cited as having been an ardent opponent of the illegal trade in firearms. His murder was consequently painted
as the work of criminals whose illegal trade the councilor was stridently
fighting to suppress. There were two widely circulating local versions of
why he was killed and who killed him, one propagated by Pokot and one
by Kikuyu. Based on their commonalities and the extent to which many
dimensions are largely agreed upon by local actors, I consider them far
closer to what actually happened. Despite sharing many details, however,
they cannot both be fully true. These accounts related to the illegal trade
in guns, but in neither version was he attempting to stamp out the trade.

Each version claimed that he was acting as an intermediary for Kikuyu
who wanted to buy guns from Pokot. He was said to have been given
70,000 Kenya shillings by Kikuyu (approximately $1,000), which he was
supposed to use to buy four guns from Pokot. In all local accounts, how-
ever, he double-crossed someone. The Kikuyu version maintains that he
took the guns from the Pokot but never paid them the money, and the
Pokot killed him in revenge. In the Pokot version of the story, he was
killed by his own people, by other Kikuyu. He was said to have taken
the Kikuyus’ money but never gave them the Pokot guns—so the
Kikuyu killed him. Of course, it is entirely plausible that he double-
crossed both the Kikuyu and the Pokot—though it is highly unlikely
(based on relations between the groups) that members of the two groups
conspired to kill him.

Tinga illustrates other personal aspects of this ethnography but, perhaps
more significantly, the types of uncertainty that constitute the lived expe-
rience of the people whose stories make up this book. As mentioned
above, Tinga was a mainstay at the homestead of Lekeren, where I have
stayed during most of my time in Samburu from 2001 to the present.
When I returned to Kenya in 2001 (after a hiatus following my doctoral
research), Tinga was a boy of about seven. He was the son of one of
Lekeren’s Pokot neighbors at his other settlement in neighboring Laiki-
pia District. There were no good primary schools in that area, so Lekeren
agreed to take him in, and he stayed in Samburu, living in the house
of one of Lekeren’s wives. Tinga became good friends—almost like
brothers—with Lekeren’s boys, who were around his age. He also played
with my children, so I got to know him well.
Although everyone recognized that Tinga was Pokot, no one seemed to care much while the Samburu and the Pokot remained on good terms. He had many Samburu friends and learned to speak Samburu. Occasionally someone mentioned that he was Pokot. I recall, for instance, a time when the ball my children were playing with inadvertently went through a crack in Lekeren’s house while it was locked and Lekeren was away with the key. Other children called Tinga, and he managed to find a way to squirm into the locked house. Although it was probably simply a matter of his size and dexterity, people joked that being Pokot—who are reputed to be thieves—gave him the skill to break into people’s homes. Tinga lived with Lekeren for roughly six years without incident. His father visited him occasionally, but he rarely if ever went to visit his family on school holidays.

When the war between the Samburu and the Pokot began in 2006, nothing changed much at first for Tinga. There was some gossip that a few neighbors were saying things about Tinga behind his back. One woman supposedly talked about wanting to slit his throat, and there were general—if undefined—murmurings that Tinga was an enemy among us,
a Pokot. Lekeren and his family defended him, none more vehemently than Lekeren’s third wife, Alleni, in whose house he lived. “Tinga is a Samburu! He’s not a Pokot!” she would exclaim when she heard rumors that some viewed him as an enemy.

Slowly, however, things deteriorated. In a Pokot raid some distance from Lekeren’s home, many cattle were stolen, including many belonging to Alleni’s birth family. Many claim that Alleni abruptly shifted her attitude (though I never saw or heard this firsthand). Bitter at the loss of her family’s cattle, she reputedly came to see Tinga as symbolic of those who had stolen her livestock and began to hate him as a Pokot. Then he got horribly sick with a stomach ailment so severe that many feared he was going to die. Though he was treated and survived, this spurred more rumors and concerns. Had he been poisoned (perhaps by the woman who cared for him but now was filled with bitterness toward the Pokot)? Tinga himself tells me he just ate some bad food at school that made him sick. Lekeren, however, did not want to take chances, particularly because he had heard that Tinga’s mother was inconsolable, crying frequently in fear that the Samburu would kill Tinga. Even if it was a stomach ailment, Lekeren surmised, it was a close call—not just for Tinga, but also for himself. The consequences of being responsible for Tinga’s death could be enormous. He arranged to meet with Tinga’s father at a peace meeting between the Samburu and the Pokot and returned the boy to his parents.

When I began working intensively with the Pokot, I was surprised to see Tinga. I was unaware at first that he was Simba’s nephew, but I met his father, Lokorr, through Simba and then subsequently saw Tinga on several occasions. The boy was saddened to have left his friends in Samburu. He longed to return there—to enter high school, perhaps, at Maralal High School (in the Samburu District headquarters) and rejoin his friends, his brothers. And while he and his friends were always excited to hear news of each other as I traveled back and forth between the areas, he finished his childhood without ever having the liberty to return in safety to the place he regarded as home.

Tinga’s story may be read in some ways as similar to my experience with the counselor and his car—though I certainly regard his as more
meaningful and more poignant. Tinga lacked the luxury of being a global anthropologist who can leave the world of friends-who-might-be-bandits for places with fewer uncertainties and different human connections. This is Tinga’s only world, yet he lives in it precariously and understands it uncertainly. He has inhabited two worlds, Pokot and Samburu, but came to prefer the one in which he was ultimately a sort of foreigner, the one he was forced to leave when tensions arose that were beyond his control but in which he had become unfairly implicated. But more importantly, in my case the dangers were only physical and in my estimation manageable—and I had the choice to not be there. For someone like Tinga, however, the physical dangers were unclear but the emotional dangers real. Although he was defended by those in his adopted home at the time of war, ultimately the person closest to him is reputed to have rejected him. He insists he wasn’t—as it was rumored—poisoned. But can he truly know that he simply “ate some bad food” at school, as he explained to me? And is it even possible for him to say or believe the opposite, that he had been poisoned by those to whom he felt close, perhaps even (as vaguely rumored) by a woman who had become his surrogate mother?

The accounts described in this book are complex and can be read in multiple ways depending on one’s position and inclinations. Of course they are presented here principally as a mode of scholarship. I aim to use this material to further our understanding of the nature of violence, particularly between intimates, and explain how those involved make sense of violence as they move from peace to war and back again. But the stories are many things, and they involve real people’s lives. We read a murder mystery because we are fascinated with intrigue, which leads us to forget that it is also a tragedy, depending on how one looks at it. The friends and family members of the councilor—wailing in the streets of Ol Moran as I pondered the meaning of not having ridden in his car—can tell us clearly about the tragedy in the mystery, as can the many others whose uncertain lives and sometimes uncertain deaths are described in this book.