

# WISER

## THE WISER TRANSCRIPTS

Compiled by Tinashe Mushakavanhu

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The members of the Podcast Group at WiSER are Sarah Nuttall, Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, Isabel Hofmeyr, Bronwyn Kotzen, Mpho Matsipa, Achille Mbembe and Tinashe Mushakavanhu.



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\*In this batch of transcripts WiSER scholars and fellows grapple with a range of intellectual concepts underpinning global history, philosophy and theory in Africa.

# INTRODUCING THE WISER TRANSCRIPTS



In 2020, WiSER launched The WiSER Podcast, with great success. The series profiled the work of academics, writers and artists based at the Institute in engaging, nuanced and highly listenable ways. Born of the historic nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, The WiSER Podcast took the work of the seminar room and gave it a more fully public life. It reached listeners across the African continent and in numerous parts of the world. By the end of the year we had reached more than 10 000 people—how many seminars would that have taken!

As a result of the reception of The WiSER Podcast last year, we have decided to release a series called *The WiSER Transcripts* which makes the released podcasts available in text, for ease of reference and citation. Each several weeks, we will release a batch of 4-5 transcripts. These will arrive alongside our new series of The WiSER Podcast for 2021, which will be a thematic series based on WiSER's work and its collaborative networks and institutions across many contexts.

Thank you to everyone and enormous thanks too to all at WiSER who have contributed to The WiSER Podcast and made it such a pleasure to produce, so precious an archive and so good to listen to. Enjoy reading these short, sharp, incisive and cutting edge texts drawn from lively, committed, critical thinkers in Southern Humanities research.

**Professor Sarah Nuttall, Director, WiSER**





**CAPITALISM'S GLOBAL HISTORIES**  
**ACHILLE MBEMBE & DILIP MENON**

# CAPITALISM'S GLOBAL HISTORIES<sup>1</sup>

## ACHILLE MBEMBE & DILIP MENON

A major feature of the global intellectual landscape is the extent to which the study of economic life, economic ideas, economic actors and economic institutions is back on the agenda. Such is particularly the case in the discipline of history.

The renewed focus on economic life has accompanied the expansive tide of market forces at least since the end of the Cold War and the crises that have come with this expansion. It is also the result of the relentless critique of neoliberalism if, by such a contested term, we understand a 'general framework' by which we explain to ourselves some of the calamities our times, in particular the collapse of ecosystems and the colossal attempts at redefining human beings as competitors and consumers.

New histories of capitalism are written with a focus on a huge variety of things: corporations, money and banks and stock exchanges, contracts, the market itself and its place in human experience. One such work is *Capitalisms: A Global History*, edited by Dilip Menon and Kaveh Yazdani and published by Oxford University Press. Professor Dilip Menon is the Mellon Chair of Indian Studies and the Director of the Center for Indian Studies in Africa at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

*Capitalisms: A Global History* comprises two parts. The first is titled "Major Debates and Controversies" and the second is called "Case Studies in the History of Capitalisms". Among the case studies covered by the book are England, Japan, Early Modern China, Egypt, Iran and Song China. Besides these national trajectories, a number of thematic or regional issues are covered in the first part of the book. Such is the case of South East Asia, New World slavery or the role of silver in the globalization of capitalism.

**ACHILLE MBEMBE: Why this book, why now and why in this form? We know that in 2014, Larry Neal and Jeffrey Williamson published *The Cambridge History of Capitalism*, a two-volume work that pretended to provide an authoritative account of the evolution of capitalism and its spread and impact in the world. Is your book a response to *The Cambridge History of Capitalism*?**

**DILIP MENON:** Well, *The Cambridge History of Capitalism* was the immediate provocation with its institutional economics approach that worked with minimal definitional criteria, like the existence of states, enforceable contracts, markets and property rights. This takes us back to Babylon and makes the idea of capitalism an ineffable transhistorical category. Since 2008 and the financial crisis there has been a renewed interest in capitalism but I believe that this has imposed a presentism as also making a current economic and political arrangement the entire horizon of our thinking, which too is arguably ahistorical. There is still a need to engage

(1) This conversation was broadcast in two parts as Episode 5, Season 1 on 28 May 2020. Mbembe and Menon explore the newly published book *Capitalisms: A Global History*, co-edited by Dilip Menon and Kaveh Yazdani and published by Oxford University Press (2020).

There are three problems. First, is myopia: seeing capitalism within a limited temporal and spatial paradigm, as having originated in Europe in the 18th century. Second, is ubiquity: that capitalism is all there is and that we are like the characters in *The Truman Show*: there is no outside. Third, is theology: that while there may have been economic development elsewhere, true capitalism finds its fulfillment in Europe, an ineluctable telos as it were.

**AM: So what precisely does this volume do?**

**DM:** It moves away from the self-regarding narrative of Europe's uniqueness—rationality, Protestant ethic etc—to look at the histories of economic and social formations in the world. We stress a factor which is underplayed in most narratives. This is the generation of what I would call a library of institutions, categories and techniques, from forms of organization of labour and capital, to technological innovation over the *longue durée* from the 10th to the 18th centuries that circulate globally through maritime trade, conquest, and intellectual intermediaries, for example the Jesuits.

**AM: Moving away from what you call “the self-regarding narrative of Europe's uniqueness” seems to leave your project in a double tension. Almost every single contributor to this volume seems to feel the need, at some point or the other in their own contribution, to come back to the inevitable question of what is capitalism, how should we define its essential features. Is capitalism a strictly economic process? What are the defining elements that distinguish capitalism from all other forms of socio-economic organizations? A number of the contributors, such as Joseph Inikori, settle with the classic Marxian and to some extent Weberian definition according to which a key feature of capitalism is the division of classes between propertyless wage-earners and entrepreneurs who own capital. Others seem to be satisfied with a flexible, almost open-ended definition in which capitalism is a mode of production based on market exchange. Starting from this presupposition, they then go looking for the market conditions which produced over long-time periods the mass of workers separated from their means of production on the one hand, and on the other hand the entrepreneurs who accumulated these means of production.**

**DM:** Is capitalism a strictly economic process? Certainly not. It pervades consciousness in terms of social relations and creates desires as much as dispositions of self. However, the focus of the volume is to look at the emergence of economic and social processes from the 10th to the 18th centuries which are crucial to the formation, and not in a teleological sense, of what we understand as industrial capitalism and its lifeworld from the 18th century. Are there distinctive features of capitalism that allow us to recognise it as one recognises a leopard from its spots? Arguably not, since there continues to be an overlay of various forms of labour (from wage to bondage) that characterises even the present, and the coexistence of mercantile, industrial and financial capital in concert with each other. The authors were deliberately chosen for their different methodological approaches and the tension that you notice is, I believe, a productive one.

**AM: The second tension stems from the notion (which haunts almost every single essay) that capitalism arose in Europe. Over time it spread around the world. In the process it encountered countless obstacles some of which it managed to overcome while others, it could not overcome.**

DM: With regard to the second tension, that the spectre of Europe haunts the book, I would disagree. There is only one essay, that of Henry Heller that re-engages with the Brenner, Wallerstein debates and argues that no matter the historical trajectories, Europe and America are the headquarters of capitalism.

Europe in this period was just beginning to recover from disintegrated markets, demonetization and deurbanization of the Middle Ages when Arab civilization and trade in the Mediterranean were leading to theorizations of the production process in a needle factory by Abu Mohammad Ghazali in the 12th century and labour value by Ibn Khaldun in the 14th century. Adam Smith elaborates on a pin factory in a similar fashion, the mediating figure here being Diderot.

We have to think about what the great historian of Islamicate civilizations, Marshall Hodgson, called cumulative histories of the Afro-Eurasian oikumene that circulate through the space that we call Europe. So to differentiate from the idea of the "Great Divergence", that everyone was neck to neck till Europe supposedly took its special path, we have to think with the idea of the "Great Convergence" when disparate libraries of categories and techniques in circulation are brought together. Braudel, for example, points to the influence of Indian cloth printing and dyeing, and the development of metallography in western Europe and Russia as scientists tried to figure out the secrets of Indian wootz steel (damask steel).

There is also the circulation of ideas, Alexander Bevilacqua has written about the the Republic of Arabic Letters in Europe (including translations of the Koran by Arthur Sale) as also the fact that both Quesnay the Physiocrat and Turgot, an early proponent of economic liberalism were hugely influenced by Chinese thought and state practice through the mediation of Jesuits.

**AM: You are obviously inviting us to turn our back to the "Great Divergence" hypothesis and to work with a timescale that is deeper and fractal. Yet reading this book, I kept thinking of another book written twenty years ago, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*. A key part of Chakrabarty's argument was that most of the histories of the non-Western societies had been reduced to histories of capitalist transitions or transitions to modernity the original site of which was always going to be Europe. Seen from this perspective, he argued, capitalist transitions in non-Western societies were almost always either incomplete or lacking. His way of getting out of this conundrum was then to make the case that every case of transition to capitalism was a case of translation as well. I understand that your own project is not to repeat the argument already made in *Provincializing Europe* although many a reader might be curious as to what exactly you add to that debate or to other debates fostered for instance by Jean and John Comaroff in their *Theory From the South*. Are you trying to**



**reroute? To what extent are you rerouting them on entirely new tracks? By 'deprovincializing' capitalism, where does it leave Europe? What remains of Europe after the story of capitalism has been globalized?**

**DM:** We must remember that Dipesh's book was written in the last century, almost a generation ago! As of now Europe as much as the idea of Europe is in disarray and thinkers like Esposito have been arguing for a new philosophy for Europe that engages with its exigent present of immigrants and economic downturn and the demise of earlier ideas of social democracy. I think we need to remember that the use by date for Europe as much as postcolonial theory is over now. That said, as the political theorist Kaviraj has pointed out the European trajectory was merely an ideal type; so for example, India had democracy and full voting rights before industrialization and mass literacy. So as to "deprovincializing capitalism", Europe was just one cog in a set of interconnected processes, and the book decentres Europe from the capitalism narrative.

**AM: In terms of decentering Europe from the capitalism narrative, are there particular contributions in the book you would like to single out?**

**DM:** Dennis Flynn shows how the ecological devastation of the Americas in the 16th century also led to the dissemination of agricultural products like rubber crucial to the industrial revolution, and Chinese agricultural expansion was dependent on peanuts and sweet potato and nutrition regimes. Leonard Marques argues (to go back to the seemingly essential features of capitalism) in an extension of Eric Williams that slavery was part of the ensemble of global capitalism. The plantation complex in Madeira, São Tomé and the Canaries, he says, was the first agricultural revolution. Again, the self-congratulatory argument made for Europe's "industrious revolution" was largely about superfluous consumption of sugar and tobacco that instituted coercive labour regimes elsewhere. Stanziani argues for Russia (usually seen as distinctive in Marxist theoretical terms, the "Russian Road" as it were) that forced labour and capitalist development could go hand in hand. This is not surprising since contemporary capitalism also encompasses a range of labour practices. So we see serf entrepreneurs, from 1750 on, and both landed aristocracy and peasants engaging in capitalist production. The clichéd historical division of labour between advanced industrial and backward agricultural regions argued from the western European experience needs revision.

**AM: Does the ongoing "rotation" of the center of gravity of the world from the West to the East play a role in this call to decenter the European library?**

**DM:** When we look at the world now with the Asian economies surging ahead, the triumphalist narrative of Europe and its historical characteristics again needs rethinking. South East Asia, conventionally left out of histories of capitalism and seen largely as a late 20th century success story, offers us many prescient models as Eric Tagliacozzo shows. After all, it was the search for spices that began it all in the 15th century! South East Asia points our attention towards maritime trade, fluid property regimes, thinking beyond national territories and shows how historically states were one among many players. The European library begins to appear either impoverished or derivative in terms of historical primacy or exemplarity.

**AM:** Using your book as a starting point, I would now like to extend our conversation beyond your own project. Just as historians are drawing our attention again to the deep histories of capitalism, sociologists and specialists of other disciplines are at the forefront of a revival of critical studies of what they call '*the new capitalism*'. Here I have in mind Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's monumental book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. They perceive a huge contrast between the physical capitalism of the national and manufacturing age and contemporary capitalism which, in their eyes, is becoming increasingly metaphysical, I would say animist. Many attribute this shift to the so-called global information society or, to put it differently, to the increasing importance technological systems are nowadays playing not only as key infrastructures but also as social strategies of exploitation. Crucial in this regard is, for instance, contemporary capitalism's aim to draw value from involuntary nervous activities. It is encroaching not only on human desires and cognitive capacities, but also on the huge reserves of their emotions, fears, anxieties and passions. All of these are fast being transformed into commodified circuits. How does the historian of "deep time" make of these shifts?

**DM:** As with Dipesh's book, Boltanski and Chiapello's book too is of the last century though Boltanski has extended his project on the sociology of modernity to move beyond the idea of production and corporate management to 1. biopolitics 2. to look at the tension between the idea of reality as socially and legally constructed and the idea of world as experience and resource against this construction 3. to the extension of capitalism beyond national boundaries that generates anxieties and paranoia. The idea of a spirit of capitalism is very much in consonance with the Weberian project and they track the transition from the bourgeois entrepreneur of the 19th century to the director of corporations in the mid 20th century, and finally, the third spirit post 1968 analysed through management texts which excavate the libertarian and romantic currents of the late 1960s to talk about the charisma, vision etc of new leaders. Now all of this is very French and I am not sure what to do with it, frankly! And it thinks from within the world of an already achieved capitalism and is less concerned with trajectories and other possibilities. One of the interesting essays in the volume is by Kent Deng on China evocatively working with the idea of one-off capitalism, a short circuited trajectory as it were. A contingent set of circumstances between the 10th and 13th centuries, a mini Ice Age and threat of northern invasions leads to a southward expansion of agriculture and a minor green revolution. There is a demand for copper, tin and lead and the Chinese embark on seafaring with over 3000 ships, a sudden burgeoning that comes to an end with Mongol invasion and rule. After the voyages of Zheng He that map the Indian Ocean in the early 15th century the Chinese never took to the sea again. What we have in the Christian Era is a spirit of adventure and discovery as networks are established between non contiguous territories through commodities, ideas and migration. Roman trade with South Asia, the Arab trade in the Mediterranean that links the Roman Empire with an emergent Europe, the creation of an Indian Oceanic network of capital and labour from Melaka to Aden and the Swahili coast. It is this spirit that underlies the Great Convergence and the diffusion of a library of institutional forms, labour techniques and forms of deployment of capital that necessitate an engagement beyond anachronistic ideas of nation states and certainly any idea of European supremacy until the onset of colonialism and empire.

**AM: Let's imagine you were writing this book today, in the midst of Covid-19. How would you frame it? What does this pandemic tell us not about capitalism's past, present and future as such, but the fate of the propertyless or today's labour regimes?**

DM: Since the central theme of our thinking at the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA) has been to engage with the epistemologies and histories of the global south and move beyond Euro American categories for understanding, I suspect the book would have looked the same! However, as you rightly suggest, we are in a historical conjuncture that is unique with Covid-19 having unsettled much of what we take for granted including the experience of the global through travel. But as the cliché goes, we are all in the same ocean though not in the same boat! If we think about the last decade one of the most significant images has been that of the migrants on the ocean; from the Rohingyas to Syrians who scorned national boundaries, passport regimes and border control. This *mentalité* would be of a piece with the period that we discuss in our book, but increasingly, we shall see a consolidation of national regimes and national borders because of the pandemic. The paranoia that the virus has generated has allowed for a new authoritarianism to emerge where the state has become the enforcer of law and order without care. In Brazil, USA, India and UK we see authoritarian personalities in power who are more interested in the performative than the pastoral. So we are probably seeing another phase of curtailed globalization and the increased power of national states, China being the most successful form. If 2008 had brought the state back in to protect financial capital, we are seeing a different formation with the state and capital coming together for forms of surveillance. Naomi Klein calls this the Screen New Deal: remote learning, telehealth, ecommerce and public private partnership in accruing mass surveillance data. I would certainly want to think of the state differently and not just as one actor among many.

**AM: What about labour?**

DM: A consequence that arises from this is the great abandonment of labour. One of the most tragic images has been that of migrant labourers cut off from employment, security, and income who are undertaking great treks to get back home. Even as this is happening, states are working to ensure that post Covid recovery will proceed smoothly so stricter, draconian labour regimes are being put in place which are without safeguards or guarantees of care. We might be returning to the early ages of industrial capitalism where the very idea of the rights of workers did not exist. And this is being accompanied by the fetish of technology to make things better. Humans are biohazards, machines are not. Artificial Intelligence has become the golden calf that capital worships. The story of the contingent lives of labour in history is something that I might want to emphasize more.

**AM: As I said earlier, Capitalisms: A Global History showcases a number of powerful case studies. Missing from the picture, though, is Africa. Yet we are both aware of the rich and bewildering diversity of its deep historical economic forms of organization, the intricate nature and complexity of its social processes, the multiplicity of its forms of exchange, its indigenous currency zones, market regimes and different scales of value formation. There is a lot to be said here and I need to be careful to not make wild generalizations.**

**But one fact is clear. Africa and the West have been co-producers of each other's being and of each other's otherness. Let's assume this is the case. To what extent introducing Africa into your equation (decentering Europe) obliges us to perform an act of double decentering?**

**DM:** This omission did not arise from absentmindedness and considering that this book project was conceptualized here in South Africa, thinking about the Continent would be a point of departure. At the conference, we had a paper by Bill Freund on South Africa and an informal session with Joseph Inikori both of whom felt that given the chronological spread of the volume, it would be difficult to have a chapter on capitalism in Africa. While one could think with Mansa Musa of Mali in the 14th century, the production, accumulation and circulation of gold and the scale of his spending that caused a 10 year recession in the early decades of the 14th century displacing the gold market in Cairo, there was not a sufficient academic literature that we could rely on. There was also the history of mercantile activity within the Indian Ocean (between western India and the Swahili Coast) and the possible history of instruments of financial exchange and currency, again we were unable to locate the scholarship which would be commensurable with our enquiry. That said, from the 18th century it is clear from work in the past decade that consumer demand in West Africa was dictating production in Europe and Asia. The demand for Indian cotton textiles and their consumption shaped patterns of global trade, influencing economies and businesses from Western Europe to South Asia. Jeremy Prestholdt's work on East African consumer demand particularly for cloth shows how this drove industrialization in Salem, Massachusetts as much as in Bombay under British colonial rule. Arguably, the birth and growth of industrial capitalism in India was driven by demand from Zanzibar and this is a history that is still in its infancy. However, we yet have to move away significantly from the paradigm in which KN Chaudhuri in his magisterial work on Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean could leave out Africa altogether. So our book also reflects the gaps in the historiography which we need to build on.

**Achille Mbembe** is a world-renowned theorist, public intellectual and Professor of History and Politics at WISER.

**Dilip Menon** is Mellon Chair in Indian Studies and Director of Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA) at Wits University.



**BIOMETRIC CAPITALISM**  
**KEITH BRECKENRIDGE**

# BIOMETRIC CAPITALISM<sup>2</sup>

## KEITH BRECKENRIDGE

In this podcast I want to talk about work that I've been doing for a long time now, nearly twenty years, which is studying the development of a new kind of capitalism on the African continent. I'm calling this Biometric Capitalism and I know that as soon as I use that phrase people are going to say, "This is too complicated to understand or terribly boring." And I think if I can try and do one thing with this podcast it's to get people to see, in fact, how interesting, exciting, but also, in some ways, how dangerous this new development actually is.

So I want to do three things: I want to talk about what Biometric Capitalism is; I want to explain why this new form of capitalism is distinctive to the African continent; and why it represents a really fundamental – a 180 degree – change in the ways in which capitalism has been developing over the last five hundred years on the continent. And then lastly I want to talk about all the political implications of Biometric Capitalism – what it is going to do to African societies, and what that may mean for the vast majority of people on the continent.

So what is Biometric Capitalism? And I think it's clear that the best way to do this is to provide an example and to look at one of the big firms that are busy with this project on the continent (and there are many of them). The simplest and easiest to understand is to look at the bank, Capitec, in South Africa. Capitec didn't exist twenty years ago. There was nothing there, and today it's the third largest of the South African banks – smaller only than Standard Bank and First National Bank/Firststrand which are old, really enormous banks, big imperial banks actually.

Capitec is twice as valuable as Absa; it's three times as valuable as Nedbank. Nedbank has been around for over a century. Capitec has ten million customers; it's grown enormously, and what is really astonishing, it has doubled in value every year for the last twenty years. Capitec was at the beginning, famously a paperless bank. That was part of the motivation behind the planning for the bank and what was key to that powerlessness—getting all the documents out of the system, getting rid of all the back office work that banks do and have to hire people to manage—was a system of digital fingerprinting, right from the beginning.

They initially used a private system which they purchased I think from an Australian company, but by 2007 Capitec began using a direct link to the government's population register which we call HANIS (the Home Affairs National Identification System). That database has fingerprinting and identification information and the most basic vital data the state needs on its citizens: who your parents are, who you're married to, who your children are. After decades of post-apartheid troubles, HANIS now covers everybody in the country and lots of people who are no longer alive. All South Africans are biometrically captured there, in a sense. Their identities are captured and their fingerprints are captured in this database that sits in Pretoria. What Capitec can do, when you go into their branches to apply for credit, is confirm

(2) This was broadcast as Episode 7, Season 2 on 15 October 2020. Breckenridge discusses Biometric Capitalism and African economics in the 21st Century.

your identity against HANIS—that you are who you say you are, and of course that allows them to make much better decisions about whether they want to allow you to borrow money because they can track where you have made similar requests either internally in their company, or outside. They use what we call the Credit Bureau and their own credit scoring inside the bank to make those decisions automatically. They've been able to do this extremely profitably, it's been very useful for the company. That is an invisible second part of the Biometric Capitalism story, that after 2005 the law in South Africa requires all lenders to share information with one of the credit bureaus. This shared information is an unusual form of communal property actually, created by the banks—very unusual in South Africa. The banks share with each other and with all other lenders. That includes all forms that provide services on credit, like cell phone companies, but also others, like landlords, who want to be able to assess the risks of letting their properties. All these firms share information about all transactions and that information is available to everybody who subscribes to the database.

The credit bureaus have a surprisingly accurate and complete picture, a better understanding in fact than customers typically have of their own earning and spending ability, and they use that combination—those two really powerful technical instruments. The one is the simple biometric query, the ability to ping the HANIS database owned by the state. When you put your fingerprint on one of the little readers, HANIS will respond: “This is Keith Breckenridge, this is not Keith Breckenridge.” And then another database—one of the privately managed Credit Bureau databases—answers the question of whether you're likely to be a good credit customer. There are many of these databases (many run entirely inside the lending firms) and the combination is what allows them to build up a tremendously profitable ‘asset base’ in credit.

These tools have allowed them to lend to tens of millions of people at relatively high interest rates. These interest rates, to be clear, are not as shocking as the most common microlenders—mashonisas. It's not 30% a month, but it's like 30% a year. But this is in a global context as you are probably aware, where many central banks are trying to pay people to borrow. Interest rates are close to zero around the world, so this particular combination of biometric lending is a very profitable model of lending.

The Capitec model does not only use fingerprinting in its outward facing technology. It is not only when customers come to them to ask for credit. They also use biometrics internally. Capitec is one of the very few firms in the world where your fingerprints have to be capturable by their biometric database when you apply for a job. In other words, if your fingerprints cannot be read, you cannot work for Capitec – this is a requirement of their job short-listing. They then use those biometric authentication tools to authenticate – to confirm its you, and that you have the right permissions – to make every decision within the bank's account management system.

This builds a powerful auditing system. It means that every transaction that takes place, every time money moves inside Capitec or credits are transferred out of the bank, there is a fingerprint for the bank official responsible attached to the transaction record. This is the internal politics of Biometric Capitalism—a capitalism that uses biometric information from the body to audit and track how all information moves in the system.

Home Affairs does the same in South Africa; Safaricom does something similar; Netone does exactly the same; and the banking verification number in Nigeria is also similar. This is an inward and outward facing form of control that uses fingerprinting in place of all the other paper-based instruments typically used to identify people. These would include your driver's license or your passport, your birth certificate or some other identity document that shows that you are a respectable citizen—often drawing on the forms of land ownership or some other document, like a lease.

Biometric Capitalism represents a real change in the way in which capitalism has been developing on the continent for the last, half a millennium and a bit longer – five hundred, six hundred years. This is especially true of the dynamics on this continent—many scholars of African capitalism have stressed its unusual features. Consider Walter Rodney's book *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*—if you wanted to come away with a single metaphor for the system he describes in that book, it would be that African capitalism is the capitalism of the mine and the harbour: the infrastructures of exploitation are designed to move resources from a single point of exploitation to the point at which the colony connects with the international (usually a harbour).

The railway line connecting these two places does not have anything to do with the lives or economic activities of ordinary people, it just connects the resources that the colonial economy is interested in. Rodney's account is similar to the work on extraversion and the 'Gatekeeper State' that John Francois Bayart and Fred Cooper have both stressed in their histories of African capitalism. This idea of extraversion suggests that African economies have generated their surpluses at the point of exchange between the local economy and the world economy, and that accumulation then takes place offshore.

Biometric Capitalism also marks a break with the predominant reliance on mineral exports, and what is really interesting—and disconcerting—is that it is producing a new form of very profitable exploitation and accumulation that is aimed at the domestic economy. It's not at all about exporting surplus. These systems of accumulation are aimed at really taking advantage of or leveraging the new formal indebtedness of tens and millions of people on the continent.

I know that when people hear this, they will react badly. Most people look at debt with real fear. It is forbidden in most religious cultures. We are told all the time debt is a drug, it is destructive of lives and families. But economic historians have also shown how important credit has been in fostering prosperity everywhere. Wherever you look at prosperous societies what you see is that they relied very powerfully on the development of credit systems—credit between firms; between firms and the state, between individuals; between individuals and the state. This is as true of contemporary China as it was of early modern Britain.

So the really striking thing is how a form of what Deborah James has called 'credit apartheid' actually exists across the continent. This is even true for the French colonies, where the French colonial government similarly monopolized all of the forms of formal credit that were available to people. What's really striking about capitalism on this is that all African firms



struggle to access formal credit. Unlike firms everywhere else, they can't go to a bank for trade or working credit. And they can't discount bills on their future trade. It's very difficult for them to go to a bank and borrow money for local investments, for any enterprise they are interested in pursuing locally. They can't borrow from a bank in order to bring in a product and then sell it locally, and that really accounts for one of the fundamental sources of weaknesses on the continent. Biometric credit changes this, but in tricky ways. It's changing it very rapidly as the banks build up a very powerful and precise picture of what we can call reputational capital. So a company like Capitec for example, knows that of its ten million customers, who, exactly, it can lend more money to; and what the prospects are that those people will be able to repay.

In a way it's building up a digital and informed feedback-driven system for making these decisions about the allocation of formal credit that used to be made, that would have been made by the common law or by—especially—formal land titling. Formal property holding is the way in which African people accessed credit before these colonial prohibitions took place in the 1920s. And I think it's important to see that there's a real possibility of fixing some of the problems of the African continent. I don't doubt that some of that is going to happen. We're seeing a massive expansion of formal credit across the continent, but there are also clear dangers and those can be mapped in three broad areas: The first one is the one that people know about best. It's part of this moral economy of how we think about debt and that is this idea that people borrow for consumption and not for investment. So huge numbers of people are borrowing in order to buy food or to buy school clothes and they do this at high rates of interest that are in the long run unsustainable.

I don't think there's any question that is a fundamental problem, so the political question is: how to control credit and how to encourage investments that will be (if you like) productive, rather than gearing people towards making the biggest companies like Pick 'n Pay, Checkers or Woolworths even wealthier, because people will consume beyond their needs. I'm not sure how that's going to develop, but I'm not nowhere nearly as convinced as some of the people who comment on this, that that is the fundamental danger.

A potentially bigger danger is monopolization. There's a huge advantage if you are the lender and you have information about a significant number of the people who are borrowing. So in Safaricom's case that's twenty million people in Kenya. If MTN becomes the predominant lender in Nigeria they will know a great deal about half the Nigerian population, and they'll know things that none of their competitors can find out. The danger here is that in the long-run that could become an instrument that builds up something like what Facebook, Google and Amazon have done in the United States. I think the real question there, in all the instances—of the high interest rates, the poor investments in particular kinds of debt and the danger of monopolization – is about regulation. It's about having Regulators who have the ability to control how these banks and lenders do their work.

Here I think history is much more complicated than people think. The National Credit Regulator in South Africa, even in the Netone story has been really effective in controlling how

interest rates were issued to the poorest borrowers. The story is not at all what people think in the public domain. The regulator actually has done really effective work.

Then finally there's the issue of what we could call 'Presidentialism'. The danger (and it's both a resource and a threat) is that these companies form alliances with the most powerful political interests. This is a little bit like what has often happened with oil where the biggest oil companies connect up with the Presidency and the President's family becomes a great beneficiary of the wealth which is generated from oil exports—something that, until recently, was especially true of the Angolan economy.

The danger is that these firms make a deal and they literally offer equity, they offer a significant shareholding to the most powerful families in the country. This could be a real driver of long-term Authoritarian Government. I think there's a danger here and we're seeing it play out in many countries. So one of the things that's really key is for people to skill up and to think carefully about how these technologies function and to avoid hiding from them whenever you hear terms that you're unfamiliar with. We hope people can see from this little podcast why it's worth spending a little bit of time trying to understand this problem.



**AFRICA AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS**  
**SIZWE MPOFU-WALSH**

# AFRICA AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS<sup>3</sup>

## SIZWE MPOFU-WALSH

Hi, I'm Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh and I'm a Postdoctoral Fellow at WISER. I recently completed a doctorate in International Relations at Oxford. And in this podcast, I'll be summarizing that work, and reflecting on what I hope are some of the contributions that the work makes to the wider field. The thesis is entitled 'Obedient Rebellion: Nuclear Weapon-Free Zones and Global Nuclear Order 1967 to 2017'. So, in a comparative case study of three different nuclear-weapon-free zones—the African, Latin, American and South Pacific zones—I draw on archival evidence, as well as oral historical evidence to analyze two questions: Why do these zones exist? And then why do they persist?

Now in this podcast, I'd like to do three things. First, I'll trace the background of nuclear-weapon-free zones, and try to make the case for why they are an intrinsically interesting area of study in International Relations, and in fact, an overlooked area; and second, I'll take you through my argument. And the argument that I make for both why these zones exist, and then why they persist. I'll then put the argument into practice by looking at one of the cases that I examine in the thesis, which is the African nuclear-weapon-free zone. And then, finally, I'll end by reflecting on some of the wider implications for theory, for history, and for the discipline of IR.

So what is a nuclear-weapon-free zone? In essence, it's a place in the world where there is a legally binding treaty, which prevents the use, stockpiling, transportation, implantation, acquisition or retention of nuclear weapons. So nuclear-weapon-free zones are places where states come together to ban the use or even the mere presence of nuclear weapons in a given territory. And, since the middle of the 20th Century, they've spread across half the world's territory.

Today, they cover over 100 countries, encompass 39% of the human population, and they span the entire Southern Hemisphere and also interestingly, they don't just take place over states. But there are nuclear-weapon-free zones governing all of outer space. There are nuclear-weapon-free zones governing the seabed. And there are also nuclear-weapon-free zones in states themselves. For example, Mongolia is a nuclear-weapon-free zone. So, these zones are also quite interesting creatures within International Relations, in that they don't tend to form over stereotypical territorial divides. But curiously, International Relations theory has failed to appreciate the profundity of this story, both for the ways that it challenges conceptions of the state, but also because of the existential importance of nuclear non-proliferation.

And so the thesis is really an attempt to bring nuclear-weapon-free zones to the forefront of questions of nuclear security by asking how nuclear non-proliferation has actually been

(3) This was broadcast as Episode 3, Season 1 on 14 May 2020. Mpofu-Walsh examines the politics of nuclear weapon-free zones in the African continent, a region of the world not usually associated with the geopolitics of nuclear disarmament.

successful in the Global South? And in what ways can theoretical lessons be learned from this multilateral cooperation?

So let me begin by addressing the background to nuclear-weapon-free zones and explaining why they're important. At a summit in Cairo on the 11th of April 1996, then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, grinned before a phalanx of international dignitaries gathered to celebrate the birth of the long awaited African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty. To Mubarak's left stood Ethiopian Foreign Minister, Seyoum Mesfin, and to his right was Amir Moosa, Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Behind them shone a bright white slogan, emblazoned in three different languages against an emerald green background— "Africa free of nuclear weapons". On that day, 47 of Africa's then 53 states signed what became affectionately called the Treaty of Pelindaba.

The name 'Pelindaba' was intentionally ironic. It was the name of South Africa's secret nuclear research facility, concealed among the jagged Magaliesberg Mountains to the west of Pretoria, which housed apartheid South Africa's nuclear weapons programme. The term 'pelindaba' which is a portmanteau of 'phela indaba', which means 'end the story' in isiZulu and isiXhosa, was for the apartheid government about 'ending the story' by generating an unassailable military supremacy in Africa, but the term took on a new meaning as African states reappropriated it to mean 'ending the story' of nuclear weapons on the continent. But, far from ending the story, the Treaty of Pelindaba formed part of a vast transcontinental story that began four decades earlier and persists into the present.

Having traced the background to nuclear-weapon-free zones, and then move on to the second part of this podcast, which is to outline the argument that I make in response to the two questions that I pose. First, I look at what are the events that trigger nuclear-weapon-free zones, and cause them to be prioritized within their regions. And here, I developed the notion of an external nuclear intervention.

An external nuclear intervention is an intervention by an external nuclear power into a territory, using nuclear weapons, or bringing nuclear weapons into that territory or testing nuclear weapons in that territory, against the consent of the states in that territory. So, for example, when France tested nuclear weapons in the Sahara, in Africa, against the will of newly-decolonizing states within that territory, that was an external nuclear intervention.

So these interventions act as triggers. But there is an underlying set of circumstances which also needs to be taken into account and this is where the title of my thesis comes from, which is 'Obedient Rebellion'. I claim that, within these territories, there is an inherent tension. On the one hand, there's a sense in which these states want to become part of global nuclear order, they want to partake as good citizens in the institutions, the rules and the norms that frame global nuclear order.

So there's this impulse for obedience, as I call it on the one hand, but this is tempered by the opposite impulse, which is an impulse for rebellion. And this is a sense in which these states see the global nuclear order as fundamentally unfair, see the global nuclear order as iterating

and instantiating a form of nuclear apartheid where, on the one hand, certain states are permitted to acquire nuclear weapons and nuclear power even and other states are subordinated into positions where a lack of this nuclear ambition is locked in. And this is also enmeshed with colonial solidarities in the third world which build around decolonization and denuclearization.

And these two processes—denuclearization and decolonization—intertwine at the same historical moment. And therefore, the rhetoric of each becomes entangled. And so you also have this contending impulse within these states of rebellion against nuclear order. And so, cheek by jowl, you have these two contending impulses, which are incoherent and it's ironically the incoherence of these impulses, which produces nuclear-weapon-free zones. And my argument is that nuclear-weapon-free zones become venues by which these incoherences and these multi-valent impulses are ultimately accommodated.

And so, nuclear-weapon-free zones serve both to reinforce a sense of good nuclear citizenship. But at the same time, they also come to represent it as a semi-rejection of that order, and the sense in which nuclear non-proliferation happens from below rather than from above. Now, this accounts both for why the zones come into being but obedient rebellion also plays a role in terms of helping the zone to persist.

So that once they come into being more and more states realize that nuclear-weapon-free zones can mediate this tension that they feel between an antagonistic relationship towards global nuclear order, and a more accommodating relationship. So that's the argument in a nutshell.

Let me move on to the third part of this podcast which is trying to put the argument into practice. So my argument begins with a trigger which is an external nuclear intervention and in Africa, we see this. And the external intervention is a set of nuclear tests, which are initiated by France, in the Sahara Desert, some of which take place in what are French colonies at the time, and some of which take place in Algeria, which is struggling for independence at the time as well. And this external nuclear intervention, this nuclear testing, has a profound impact on decolonizing African states in ways that I think have been forgotten by historical memory. And so what I do is I trace some of the rhetoric of these newly decolonizing states around French nuclear testing, and trace how that becomes a key part of African diplomacy in the latter part of the 20th century.

So, just for some examples, Nkrumah's Ghana becomes absolutely obsessed with the question of French nuclear tests and it becomes one of Nkrumah's priorities, perhaps his apex foreign policy priority. He says:

**There are two swords of Damocles, hanging over the continent and we must remove them. They are the nuclear tests in the Sahara by the French government, and the apartheid policy of the government of the Union of South Africa.**

African states were absolutely incensed. Various African states took diplomatic measures against France at the United Nations General Assembly.

We see the Assembly used as a venue for an unprecedented coordinated African assault on French nuclear tests, and linking this question to the question of denuclearization and decolonization. So, for example, Wachuku Jaja, the first representative to the United Nations of Nigeria in his maiden speech says:

**We put up the sign, please do not touch, take your rockets to your own homes, test your atom bombs in your own kitchens, do not bring them into our continent. This is why we are unanimous in opposing France's tests in the Sahara Desert. France carried out these explosions in the pyramids and the Alps. And on the farms of France. It is all right with us if France wants to bomb itself.**

And various other representatives from Sudan, later from Algeria, from Ethiopia and of course from Ghana reiterate these sentiments at the General Assembly. And it's perhaps the first time you see a kind of coordinated African action on the international stage. But I recognize as well that while these interventions are couched in the language of an anti-imperial solidarity, they continue to take place within the institutional ambit of global nuclear order. In fact, these speeches are taking place right within the United Nations General Assembly.

And so you have this tension, in which there's a sense in which on the one hand, African states are unsympathetic towards global nuclear order, but the only way that they can voice this antagonism is through the institutions of global nuclear order itself and this pattern plays out throughout the decades and in very interesting ways in Africa. Of course, South Africa becomes a fly in the ointment, because as African states are coalescing around a denuclearization agenda, the apartheid government is secretly pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

So the thesis also traces the genesis and the evolution of South Africa's nuclear program. But then, eventually, the decision by South Africa to come around to a four-decades-long African argument about denuclearization. And finally, when those two processes come together, in the early to mid 1990s, South Africa finally joins its African counterparts in supporting denuclearization, and then actually becomes quite a fierce proponent of the African nuclear-weapon-free zone. But even as it's doing this, even as it's rejoining the Non-Proliferation Treaty, even as it's becoming a good nuclear citizen, there is always this latent critique in South Africa, as in other states, about the unfairness of the regime, and the need for it to change.

So that's one example. And of course, in the thesis, I go into a lot more depth into the archives into the rhetoric of various nuclear decision makers across the continent, and try to trace this tension between obedience and rebellion in the realm of nuclear politics. Finally, I'll come to some of the contributions that I hope this work makes to the wider field.

Theoretically first, the concept of obedient rebellion is one that I think could have currency and various other contexts in International Relations theory, but also in other post-colonial appraisals of international politics or even domestic politics. Then there are a number of historical contributions in the thesis from reinterpreting the importance of the Cuban Missile Crisis to looking at French nuclear tests, to reprioritizing the nuclear question in African decolonization and the history of African decolonization and, of course, the same is true in the South Pacific, which I also touch on in the thesis.

I think the thesis re-inscribes the importance of the Global South in the realm of nuclear non-proliferation, and in global nuclear politics, a realm in which it's often marginalized and ignored. As regards questions of existential importance, the nuclear has often played second fiddle to the environmental or even the biological. But this thesis calls on us to continue to regard the nuclear as fundamental: not only to the preservation of human life, but also to our understanding of international politics.





**THE BUILT REMAINDERS OF  
KINSHASA'S INDEPENDENCE**  
RUTH SACKS

# THE BUILT REMAINDERS OF KINSHASA'S INDEPENDENCE<sup>4</sup>

## RUTH SACKS

**ZAIRE IS HAPPY AND PROUD TO CONTRIBUTE TO CIVILIZATION  
SOMETHING STRONG AND ORIGINAL, ITS AUTHENTICITY.**

This is a quote by Mobutu Sese Seko from 1975, during the era of authenticity in post-independence Kinshasa. I think it gives an impression of the buoyant mood of the time. It is the built remains of this moment that I'm going to discuss today. My focus is on the futuristic buildings that remain from Mobutu's reign in the capital of the country today known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I am going to refer to it as the Congo. The Mobutu regime was the first government after independence in 1960 to be able to pursue major construction projects and cultivate a post-colonial culture.

I will describe one of Mobutu's state sites in Kinshasa today: a massive landmark known colloquially as Tour de 'l'Échangeur,' meaning 'tower of the exchange', which is commonly shortened to 'The Exchange.' I talk about the exchange from the point of view of its current day situation, which is a state of continual disrepair and reconstruction. I talk about the degree to which the site speaks back to its origins, as well as what the building itself has to say within the city. The last time I visited the site was in 2015, when I arranged to use one of its elevated round rooms as a venue for a Global South arts conference.

The scholars and artists, most of whom had never experienced the sight up close, got a sense of some of the ambitions and failures of the legacy of an iconic time. This was the error of 'recours a l'authenticité,' meaning 'recourse in authenticity.' The time of authenticity came about after Mobutu took control of the Congo in 1965, at which point he renamed the country Zaire. In the relative state of stability and economic buoyancy that lasted until 1974, he established his own brand of autocratic patronage in the built environment and the arts.

Part of his process in amassing political power was bound up in developing a national culture. This was ostensibly to counteract the damage done by colonial oppression. Elements of traditional African culture, which had formerly been used by colonial rule to encourage and separate tribal allegiances, was now implemented as a binding force for the new nation. One example of the state-organized public culture was a specific dress code for men who wore the 'abacost' and women who wore the 'pagné.' European names were done away with and replaced by African ones.

This recourse to tradition was also the complement to a modernizing drive, evident in the modern estate architecture of the Mobutu early years. New towers like The Exchange, stadiums, and more, ushered in Military law, and everyday culture was tightly controlled. Harsh policing, public executions, and the disappearance of citizens prevailed. As Mobutu's

(4) This was broadcast as Episode 11, Season 1 on 16 July 2020. Sacks discusses post-independence sites in Kinshasa, focusing especially on L'Échangeur [the Exchange] in Limete as a means of understanding processes of disrepair and reconstruction in the city today.

rule progressed and was threatened, the culture of fear was amplified. The Congolese economy, already devastated by colonial and neocolonial extraction, further deteriorated.

In 1974, copper prices dropped and this, combined with the effects of the regime's particular modes of nationalization, high taxation and government corruption, rendered everyday life a struggle for the average Congolese citizen. With an intensifying backdrop of private hardship and ebbing public morale, the exchange came into use in 1974. Building on the massive edifice began in 1970, but has never been officially completed. The site was designed by Franco-Tunisian Olivia Cocoub, who also produced prestigious state landmarks elsewhere in Africa. Cocoub did not include any distinctive element in this brutalist design that speaks directly to authentic Congolese culture or aesthetic traditions. However, the towering form is such a prominent feature in the city skyline that it is generally used as the icon of the city and is dubbed 'Kinshasa's Eiffel Tower'.

I think The Exchange says a great deal about the kind of city that the citizens of the new nation were invited to believe in. This towering structure marks major traffic exchange of Boulevard Lumumba from which it garners its nickname. Its tower of four enormous concrete poles, reaches into the air at a height of 210 meters. The columns emerge from a curving base of ramps, domes and outlines of garden terraces. Rounded architecture at the tower's base, and curved platforms can easily be imagined as space stations in sci-fi imagery. Initially intended as a museum and monument to former prime minister Patrice Lumumba, in whose murder Mobutu played a part, the site was used as a military base and prison for much of its existence. It has also always been a radio mast for the nearest airport. At most times of the day, the major traffic artery surrounding it is heavily congested. Non-stop traffic and nearby construction work generates debris, dust and fumes that hang over mostly empty grounds.

The site is accessible as the Museum of Contemporary Art and Multimedia. Visits to the museum's temporary exhibitions are arranged by appointment only, and guards escort guests through the grounds. I believe the idea to use The Exchange as a police base was not arbitrary. The Exchange's ambitious scale ensures that it is imposing as it looms above the comparatively flat vastness of the surrounding city. It is visible from very far away, but its concrete mass suggests a menacing watchtower, more than a monument. Up-close the site has an eerie quality. The exchange is separated from the dense residential area of Limité in which it is located. Its vacant terraces are visibly affected by pollution. Moss and damp stains grow around tiles and empty water features, while the grass and shrubs are neatly kept.

What was intended as the main entrance is boarded up, and the walkway intended to stretch across the city ends abruptly with the site's perimeter. The grounds are dominated by the tower's dizzying heights. Once within the museum, space is constricted. Sharp edges and coarse surfaces inside the tower halls and passageways are rough on the skin. Neither celebratory nor easily accessible to the general public, the site hovers in an ambiguous state. To me, the audacity of the design represents a hollow remainder of an African super city that never came to be. Not only does it not support the average city dweller, but it also, quite literally, is not supported by the city's infrastructure.

**THE BUILT REMAINDERS OF KINSHASA'S INDEPENDENCE**  
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There is no electricity to power a lift to the top of the radio tower and all electricity for the fledgling museum is provided by generators. Despite being a remainder of a regime of extreme violence and excess, the tower stands tall. Unlike Mobutu's palaces, sites like The Exchange are not in ruins. Other state sites from the time of authenticity are conspicuous in Kinshasa. Like The Exchange, they tend to be extravagant in design, while also showing obvious signs of stress and wear.

The CNRT Tower, home to the national radio and television network is a shooting glass curve reaching 22 storeys high. Close to the city center, the skyscraper still houses the National Broadcasting Corporation, but many parts of the tower are vacant, its glass cracked and dirty. One of the recording studios still sports bullet holes from an incident in 1993 when the network was held hostage.

There is the former presidential park on Mountain Ngaliema, once famous for its zoo, exotic gardens and mass concerts. Today, its sculpture garden lookout views are strictly out of bounds. Those parts that remain accessible are the grounds of the temporary site of the National Museum, also an Authenticity remnant. The garden is lush with overgrowth and guards have grown maze for subsistence around the empty cages of the former zoo. These and other state sites all have a similarly strange quality of neglect and partial upkeep. To give a sense of the strangeness: Kinshasa is the third largest metropolis in Africa and is set to overtake Lagos and Johannesburg. Over 70% of its estimated 12 million inhabitants are not formally employed. It is a sprawling city dominated by informal systems and structures that expand over municipal boundaries.

Empty land gets used, and only the wealthiest can maintain the upkeep of spacious grounds. For me, the strangeness of Authenticity sites, like The Exchange, is not so much its extraordinary design, but its empty silence. As the surrounding suburb teams with life, dusty pavilions, clipped lawns and empty fountains are still. The city that overflows, from within these sites, is a removed hum. In describing Mobutu's sites, I do not use architecture as a metaphor for the state that commissioned it. I am not convinced it's possible for state architecture to ever fully represent a government.

Plans and construction are the results of negotiation between an architect's vision of what the minister dealing with the new site wanted, and what is practically possible. What I do believe is that all built forms have politics or an ideology, regardless of whether they were intentionally placed there by an architect or designer. I believe the surrounding city has much to do with what the sites come to represent.

So what is The Exchange saying about its past and present? And what can this major Kinshasa icon, dislocated from everyday urban activity, tell? The tower is not only still standing, but constantly returned to as a space for a future leisure facility. In addition, it appears to be continuously under construction. There are always workers on the premises, mostly on the tower, while other parts of the site are visibly degrading.

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This seemingly perpetual state of disrepair and reconstruction suggests it holds something for the contemporary city beyond a usable base structure. I think that the sheer scale and ambition of The Exchange and the other sites still hold something of the moments of their making. Alongside the terror from the time of Authenticity, there was also something to be proud of in that moment when culture was invested in and flourished.

When Muhammad Ali fought 'The Rumble in the Jungle', citizens could separate themselves from past degradations and feel like being Congolese was something strong, something powerful. In this iconic time, being Congolese was enough. Mobutu's legacy was to manipulate a sense of patriotic agency that can still be activated by the site of permanent spectacle, such as the Tower of the Exchange. As the silhouettes of Mobutu's empty towers still dominate Kinshasa, I wonder what partial decay and reconstruction awaits the smart cities and floating cities already on the way across the globe.

**Ruth Sacks** is a South African visual artist and academic based in Johannesburg who completed her PhD at WiSER and currently holds a Postdoc at the SARChI Chair for Social Change at the University of Fort Hare. Sacks' first academic book, *Congo Style: From Art Nouveau to African Independence* (Michigan University Press and Wits University Press), is forthcoming in 2021.

**LOGISTICS, BLACKNESS  
AND SPATIALITIES**  
MPHO MATSIPA &  
BRONWYN KOTZEN

# LOGISTICS, BLACKNESS AND SPATIALITIES<sup>5</sup>

MPHO MATSIPA & BRONWYN KOTZEN

**MPHO MATSIPA:** So Bronwyn, you and I have been in conversation for a while and one of the things that's emerged is our shared interest in how circulation changes the way we understand spatiality on the African continent.

**BRONWYN KOTZEN:** Ya, absolutely Mpho. We've had some really thought provoking moments around these topics and I'm super excited to continue the conversation here.

**MATSIPA:** Ya, me too. So maybe we should start at the beginning. I know that you work on cement.

**KOTZEN:** Ya I do. A seemingly simple banal material but my research on the circulation of cement exposes the complicated power relations that underpin it.

**MATSIPA:** That's really interesting.

**KOTZEN:** Ya, I think import cement is hugely important to study because after water, it's actually the most widely consumed substance on earth. In many ways, it's a mark of humanity's obsession with the foundations that provides for the idea of modern development and I've been increasingly fascinated by the way in which the insatiable consumption of cement has moved it across national borders, particularly in Africa.

**MATSIPA:** I'm wondering what your focus on Africa reveals to you about messy power relations?

**KOTZEN:** Ya, well, the cement industry in Africa has hugely exploded over the past decade, largely because former State-owned cement companies have been sold to the private sector and new independents have mushroomed all over the continent. So I've become interested with how this seemingly simple gray matter is actually shaped by a complex set of relations that operate beyond pre-given boundaries of the Nation State. I think circulation offers a really generative analytical opening to see beyond the logic of a singular sight or, Mpho as you know as well from your work, of this idea of Africa as marginalized from the world. And instead, I suppose it starts offering a way to draw out the patterns of messy power dynamics that happen at multiple scales across the continent.

**MATSIPA:** There's a really interesting dynamic between circulation and power, you know, that the freedom to move is so deeply tied into the capacities that one has, and the kind of power one can draw on in order to negotiate certain kinds of boundaries and thresholds. It also means that one has to start thinking at multiple scales and I find that really interesting.

(5) This was broadcast as Episode 2, Season 1 on 7 May 2020. In this exchange Matsipa and Kotzen explore similarities in their work relating to space, race, and the politics of cement.

**KOTZEN:** Absolutely.

**MATSIPA:** And how a focus on circulation forces you to think at multiple scales, but also about hidden power relations, right? That one can't move freely through space in that there

In that there will be moments of friction within that movement. And I'm also really interested in similar questions around how Africans move in my own project titled African Mobilities, and also a second one on Africa's Political Futures, that explores processes of circulation by drawing on African diasporic creative work and theory. The project is multi-sited, and I'm interested in how African Urban imaginaries could be informed by transformations in our cities, and how artists spatialize blackness in a way that functions as a site of radical imagination. So my work on African Mobilities offers blackness as a category to think about architecture and urbanism.

**KOTZEN:** Wow, that's a really interesting lens Mpho. But I'm wondering what you mean by this idea of blackness?

**MATSIPA:** Bronwyn for me blackness is a mode of thought and knowledge production that allows me to centre Africa in thinking about global processes of circulation. Blackness, in this sense, is not merely a discrete particularized experience, but rather, a method through which to understand the historical processes of circulation by which people become property; international trade becomes re-spatialised; and also how various flows were and continue to be racialised. It also brings research and design closer together and calls for new modes of representation, across different locations. In short, a rupture in how we represent, read and design our environments.

**KOTZEN:** Ya, wow Mpho, really the prism of radical spatial imagination is powerful, and one that puts into conversation the profound entanglements of the material and the political. You know, Anna Marie Mill speaks of these entanglements as an ontological politics or what I've called "political matters". politics or what I've called "political matters".

**MATSIPA:** And I think that that's where architecture becomes really interesting, because it (lies) precisely in this entanglement of the political and the material. But I was wondering if you could expand on this idea a little bit further in your own work? Are you suggesting that matter has agency? And what does it mean to understand political actors?

**KOTZEN:** Yeah Mpho. Well, cement is a basic material commodity like bread or like rice. But it is also a fundamentally political product, and its circulation is open and contested. Authors like Charmaine Chua speak of circulation as essential to capital's hope for expansion, and central to this, she argues, is the way in which logistics with its gargantuan imperial reach, is really important for thinking through these ideas. But I think what's perhaps even more important to note here is the way in which logistics' omnipotence is also the reason behind its contradictions and contingencies. And so what I try and do is decenter the very matter being studied to expose the human and non-human assemblages that generate geometries of power.



**MATSIPA:** I'm so confused about this tension between the logistics as "omnipotent" but also, it being fraught with contingencies, and contradictions. But I'm also equally interested in this idea about human and non-human assemblages that generate geometries of power. How are these (constituted), and how do you trace these geometries and what are they made of?

**KOTZEN:** Yeah, well, they're incredibly complicated, but what I tried to do is trace the connections between for example, limestone supply and production facilities or foreign infrastructural development companies and dollar finance and/or even industry associations and economic knowledge. And I think what these begin to introduce are the frictions and lubrications between material operations, finance expertise and even quite prominently, the state. And I think this starts showing how the agency is operating in so many directions at once. And so logistics can be invoked as political power. It reorganizes the long held institutional idea of politics, and Mpho, reaching much further than the notion of 'dingpolitik' in the actor-network sense of the word. And I think it is a way to start working beyond the Foucauldian biopolitics, or chronological meta-narratives of colonisation, independence, or even globalisation in contemporary Africa.

**MATSIPA:** For me, the question of logistics raises important questions about the durability of certain modes of power Bronwyn. And these questions really relate to any (seemingly) easy periodization of history. Take, for example, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade as a spatial system that was produced by Capitalism. So I agree with you Bronwyn that logistics and its infrastructure has imperial reach. I also think it's important to engage with how the project of modernity is inextricably tied to projects of imperialism, through both the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism, and the fundamental contradictions that this poses - first for Euro-enlightenment ideals of "freedom," And secondly, for any normative ideas of modernization as "progress."

**KOTZEN:** Yeah, well, I think raising slave trade is a key orientating frame. How do you work through this idea?

**MATSIPA:** There are many scholars who've talked about transatlantic slavery as a spatial system and its relationship to capitalism. But for me, a founding text is the work of Walter Rodney who argued that Europe and Africa were and are in a dialectical relationship beginning in the 15th century, and this means that slavery underpinned European capitalist development. So I see blackness as a product of the logistical systems and modes of power that facilitated the circulation of goods, and also the circulation of people-as-goods, across vast territories during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. In other words, slavery required considerable infrastructure and finance in order for it to work. And that black bodies were part of this transaction and this calculus.

**KOTZEN:** Exactly. It makes me think of Nigel Thrift and the way he speaks of flows as the technological unconscious of capital flows of people and goods as almost seemingly neutral and a-political. And I think from a logistics perspective, cement production, distribution and its circulation on the continent makes visible the vivid material conscious of capital. Local expert knowledge and working is in pursuit of the capital it aims to accumulate I think in a profound way begins to show this.

**MATSIPA:** I think a dual focus on you know, the circulation of people as goods and also the circulation of goods as goods really sort of brings this idea into sharp focus or into sharp relief. So the idea that capital is not disembodied and that it does not flow smoothly through space. In other words, that space is not just a container for social relations, but is deeply invested and tied to a set of political projects.

**KOTZEN:** Yeah, The Nation State is so often thought of as simply a container as you say Mpho. And I've developed a working rubric of six unstable, what I call, technological jurisdictions where, amongst other processes, I begin to think through regional trade, border porosity, things like dollar liquidity, and infrastructure like transport and electricity infrastructure which collectively reveal diverse contingencies that often produce fragilities and unintended consequences which we seldom see.

**MATSIPA:** I really appreciate the way that you focus on technological jurisdictions in order to really draw out the granular processes that constitute logistics. But I was wondering if you could just tell me a bit more about what you mean by technological jurisdictions?

**KOTZEN:** Ya, In the interest of time, I'll explain quite briefly. These for me are spaces of material political assemblages, really. They're spaces that cannot be drawn on a map, but they still have limits. And I think they then become key to rethinking the idea of power, that logistics is always adapting to contingencies. In other words, I think seeing logistics from a geographic rather than an economic standpoint, is critical, because it forces in many ways forces us to scrutinize the technological practices that, while on the one hand, make capital work, on the other hand, they in a really severe way begin to interrupt it.

**MATSIPA:** I'm also really interested in the way that these processes take root and materialize on the ground. But as an architect, and from an architectural perspective, I'm also quite attuned to the difficulties in representing processes and networks that are largely rendered invisible. So for me, this also calls for creative mappings that can teach me and others how to both read and interpret spatial practices in conditions of flux, which is what characterizes built environments across large parts of Africa, and to interpret them beyond the tropes of 'crisis,' and marginality. So one of the projects that has been really generated for me to think through these questions is Olalekan Jeyifous' 'Shanti Megastructure Project' that projects alternative heterotopic futures for Lagos in the face of large scale real estate development, environmental precarity, and displacement of large numbers of the urban poor.

**KOTZEN:** Yeah.

**MATSIPA:** Lagos as you know, is an important port city and a strategic infrastructure network for the functioning of a global and regional economy along the West African coast. And it was also importantly, has its foundations as a slave port during the transatlantic slave trade. But returning to mega structure, the Shanti mega structure, the mega structural scale, and the technological assemblages of Jeyifous' work, produce a hyper visibility of the slum that highlights the agency of its inhabitants.

So in this project, the figure of the slum as a vortex of social death actually gets turned on its head. And the project, just in terms of its Utopian representation of these inhabitants, subvert any kind of normative understandings we might have of black life as un-geographic or inherently dispossessed. And it also subverts any totalizing narratives about uninterrupted capital flows.

**KOTZEN:** Yeah, this idea of the 'ungeographic' is one that I think is really interesting and quite a fresh take on what is ultimately at stake in these kinds of projects. And I'm thinking through how this comes to bear for you.

**MATSIPA:** I mean, as I said earlier, for me looking at these projects is more about thinking and engaging with these creative practices as theorizations of contemporary African urbanisms. And so I see these creative projects as offerings of new terrains of political and spatial imagination and action. In other words, they show the ways in which the built environment is not merely an effect of power, but also an assemblage of heterogeneous power relations, but also materialities.

**Mpho Matsipa** joined WiSER as a Research Fellow in April 2019. She completed her PhD in Environmental Design in Developing Countries at the University of California, Berkeley. She is currently the curator of African Mobilities. She divides her time between the Wits School of Architecture and Planning, where she holds a position as lecturer in design and urban research, and WiSER.

**Bronwyn Kotzen** joined WiSER as a Visiting Research Fellow in January 2020. She is a PhD candidate in Geography at the University of Cape Town. Her doctoral research focuses on the political economy of materiality in urban Africa by tracing Pan-African cement flows and is supported by Emory University's African Critical Enquiry Programme and the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust. Her broader research explores the interstices between materiality, politics and place in rapidly developing urban centres.

**CHILDBIRTH, NATALITY  
AND “YOUNG” FAMILIES  
NOLWAZI MKHWANAZI &  
SARAH NUTTALL**

# CHILDBIRTH, NATALITY AND “YOUNG” FAMILIES<sup>6</sup>

## NOLWAZI MKHWANAZI & SARAH NUTTALL

**SARAH NUTTALL:** Nolwazi, so good to be able to talk to you about your work. I'd like to start with a biographical angle. You once told me that you had wanted to be a midwife, but that you became an anthropologist instead. Could you tell us more about that?

**NOLWAZI MKHWANAZI:** Sure. I spent six months living in San Diego when I was 19 years old and while I was there, I learned a lot about the politics of childbirth, particularly from the birth gatherings that I attended across the US with Mary Kroeger, who was a certified nurse midwife. At these gatherings, I listened to midwives talking about birth outside of the hospital setting, which to me at the time was quite a radical idea that people would consciously choose to give birth outside of hospital. I also listened to women talking about how they were badly treated during childbirth and I wondered whether there were similar stories in southern Africa. And this is really what made me want to become a midwife. Unfortunately, I was too late to apply to medical school. And since I needed to go to university the year after I applied for a degree in the humanities, and anthropology was one of my subjects. I fell in love with medical anthropology, which I saw as a way to continue my interest in childbirth. Incidentally, my PhD supervisor in Cambridge Françoise Barbira-Freedman is an anthropologist and midwife, and she used to attend home births. But also, she knew some of the US based midwives that had inspired me.

**NUTTALL:** That's so unusual and serendipitous, a supervisor midwife. Nolwazi your work on childbirth, or natality, as you sometimes term it, soon extended into a wider ambit of research on reproducing bodies, and reproducing societies.

**MKHWANAZI:** Hmm. My initial focus was actually on young women, pregnancy and birth, and what is commonly known as teenage pregnancy. and I chose to focus on young women because at the time, I was young myself. And to move away from the stigma of young pregnancies, I cast my net more widely, and framed my research in terms of the experiences of growing up in post-apartheid South Africa. My age actually made it easier to have a range of conversations that went beyond the immediate focus on early childbearing and included discussions around having to undergo male initiation rites, young people's experiences of living in the township, their perceptions of the city, and their dreams and aspirations. And when I think about it, in hindsight, what was critical at the time was that we could speak quite openly about sex and relationships without having to observe a particular unspoken gender and generational norm about who you can and cannot speak to openly about sex. And as I kept on returning to the field, over time, my conversations with young people actually have become less open and they became more guarded despite everything that I tried. And I've come to realize that I can no longer have those kinds of relationships with young people or conversations. So in my recent work in Johannesburg, for example I've employed a different approach. I work with an interdisciplinary team, which consists of young people. In the recent work that I've done on

sexuality and sexual health, the team that I worked with included a biomedical researcher and an artist. And we used a variety of research methods and tools which prominently featured visual and digital technologies. So while I continue to return to my initial field site in Cape Town, although now living in Johannesburg, this has been less often, the focus of my work continues to be very much on young people. But it's now broader than just biological reproduction. And it now includes questions around social reproduction, particularly the reproduction of families. And the focus is really on the kinds of families that occur with the birth of a child to a mother, who is still in her teenage years.

**NUTTALL:** And you began using the term 'young families' after that?

**MKHWANAZI:** Yes, yes, I use the term 'young families' really to discuss this very emotive topic of teenage pregnancy, which is actually a common occurrence around many parts of the world. And also, because I'm interested in the types of families that occur because of a pregnancy to a young mother. So the word 'family' really is not meant to describe a family constituted through blood, and or marriage. It's essentially about how people make relatedness and how they build or are absorbed into relationships of care. So 'young families' allows us to see that families are made, and also they're unmade. And it helps us think about how making families is fluid, it's flexible, and it's also an ever changing process that's really affected by a range of factors. And what's interesting is that in South Africa, paternity and the presence or absence of fathers has been a central issue. And my ongoing research actually reveals a new or rather different dynamic around the centrality of paternity. In particular, we're finding that claims to paternity are not always accepted. And people may actually consciously ignore the genealogical links by denying paternity, particularly for men who aren't able to support their children, or for men with whom future relations and links are not desired. And in some cases, the acknowledgement of paternity may be accepted, even if the men are not able to perform the particular rights that legitimate those claims. So the word 'family' really here is used to describe how people make connections and create relationships of care for themselves. And for others. It reminds me and it actually comes about in relation to the group of young people that I worked with, during my PhD fieldwork. The youngest member of this tightly knit group was 13 years old. And later, as I kept on going back to the field, I learned that he'd now become a father. And I was quite intrigued by what this meant, and what his relationship with the child and with the mother was. And this got me interested in the reproduction of families in urban townships, essentially, how families are made and what the dynamics of family making are.

**NUTTALL:** Yeah, could we turn to questions of methodology and fieldwork? How did they unfold for you over the years?

**MKHWANAZI:** Well, having done research on a variety of things, including life course, kinship care, which is basically my work around young families, I'm also interested in medical education and health interventions. So there are different ways to approach ethnography and a lot of it depends on the topic, as well as how long you'll be doing your research and also your ethnographic sensibility. And for me, a big consideration has been trying to consider the many permutations of how something can be read or how it appears, because at the heart of ethnography is also translation and comparison.

So I remember being very anxious about the best way to enter the field when I did my PhD research and being aware of the kind of gendered gerontocracy that existed in Nyanga East, and also the power that religious and political and community leaders had. So at the very beginning of my fieldwork, I accepted an invitation that came from the wife of a religious pastor, who also happened to be studying anthropology. She invited me to attend a church service. At the end of the service, she introduced me and a Japanese anthropologist who she'd also invited and spoke about our research. The topic of the Japanese anthropologists work was choral music. And when she introduced this, the research was greeted with applause, while mine on teenage pregnancy was greeted with silence. The pastor's wife actually intervened to explain that while I look like a child (because I was quite young), I was not that young, I was actually older than her because I was doing my PhD and she (the pastor's wife) was only doing a master's degree. She also pointed out that I was pursuing my education and had not become pregnant as a young person, so therefore, I was actually a good role model to young people. But based on this kind of interaction, I decided to look for a different way to enter the field.

**NUTTALL:** So how does all of this, this experience in the field enable you to think about lines of relatedness as you've turned them?

**MKHWANAZI:** Well, when I talk about families or sets of relations and the idea of relatedness as being critical to who we call 'family', relatedness in this sense, is based on an understanding of a set of roles and responsibilities and obligations that follow from being related and from being 'family'. For example, as a sibling, you are expected to act in a certain way, or as a father figure, you're expected to act in a particular way. And most of the time, these ideas are dictated by cultural norms. And these are also changing and often always negotiated. So my interest in young families, for example, is really about the new changing roles and responsibilities that are given to men who decide to accept paternity or to claim paternity without having to fill particular kinds of cultural rites. But also, I mean, we have to think about the fact that some of these obligations that come with relatedness are also contested. And so they do involve negotiation, and negotiating conflicts, particularly conflicts that arise around the issue of how care is enacted. We also need to remember that care is not always experienced positively.

**NUTTALL:** Ja, sure. ja. How does the question of generation and intergenerationality work in conditions of relatedness?

**MKHWANAZI:** Specifically, in terms of young families, which essentially describes a relationship where the mother of the child is young and it's also likely that her own mother is young. So her (the young mother's) own mother might actually still be of reproductive age, or she might be employed or both. We have to think about the decisions that are made around care. For a very long time, we've always had this idea that grandparents, grandmothers specifically, will care for the child of a teenage mother. But when the grandmother is quite young, new negotiations arise as well as different ideas about responsibilities, about who provides care. In a sense, the focus on young families also sheds light on the particular care that happens between the mother and her own mother.. in the way that her own mother helps her navigate her transition to motherhood, and how she helps her own mother navigate a form of respectability. So this is a care that is very interesting in the way it happens between generations of women.

**NUTTALL:** In the end, you know, what does all of this tell us so far, about young people's worlds, in the situations that you've studied?

**MKHWANAZI:** Well, it tells us that we don't always know how they live, and that we often resort to a single story about their lives. So for example, after countless versions of the story that men want to deny paternity, that they are prone to denying paternity, especially for children that are born outside of a recognized union, when I started my research in the early 2000s, I would see that, but now things have changed and yet the narrative continues. So despite what's happening on the ground, the narrative hasn't changed at all. And this is coming out both in the research that's being done in Kwazulu Natal and in the Western Cape, specifically that fathers want to be involved in the lives of their children, especially young fathers, and that they take the role of fatherhood quite seriously, even though they aren't able to perform the particular rights that that legitimate these particular claims. And also there is another situation that comes to mind, from work that I've done in Botswana around a sexuality education program that was being provided in schools. The program was encouraging young people to date 'schoolmates', rather than people who are older, or sugar daddies. What our research found was that young girls were actually dating men in their early 20s, and not sugar daddies, and the reason for this was because these young men had access to condoms, whereas their schoolmates didn't because of the very strict rules about buying condoms or getting them from clinics. So girls, were actually making choices about safer sexual relationships, and about avoiding HIV and unwanted pregnancies. And yet it was so difficult for people to see this.

**NUTTALL:** Ah, yes, yes, this is all about the value of unexpectedness. In the end, the surprising rather than the dangers of a single story that novelist Chinamanda Adiche has spoken about. And you've written about this, you've written about the ways in which Medical Humanities work in Africa often repeats singular stories about African lives, and you've talked about your own investment. I've heard you speak about it often in telling a multitude of stories about the people you work with and that you're interested in. Do you think that the medical humanities in Africa network that you relaunched last week will contribute to this?

**MKHWANAZI:** Yes, well, our intention in creating this, this relaunch of the network was in a way to connect people.. academics, activists, artists, and researchers from across the continent, who are specifically interested in health related issues. We actually really want to create a platform where we can speak to each other, and also think together from our various locations across the continent, and also from our diverse backgrounds. So we're actually hoping that this network will enable us to showcase the richness of the research, scholarship and other forms of work that are actually happening and make them accessible to a wider audience.

**NUTTALL:** Absolutely. Ja. Exciting. Ja.

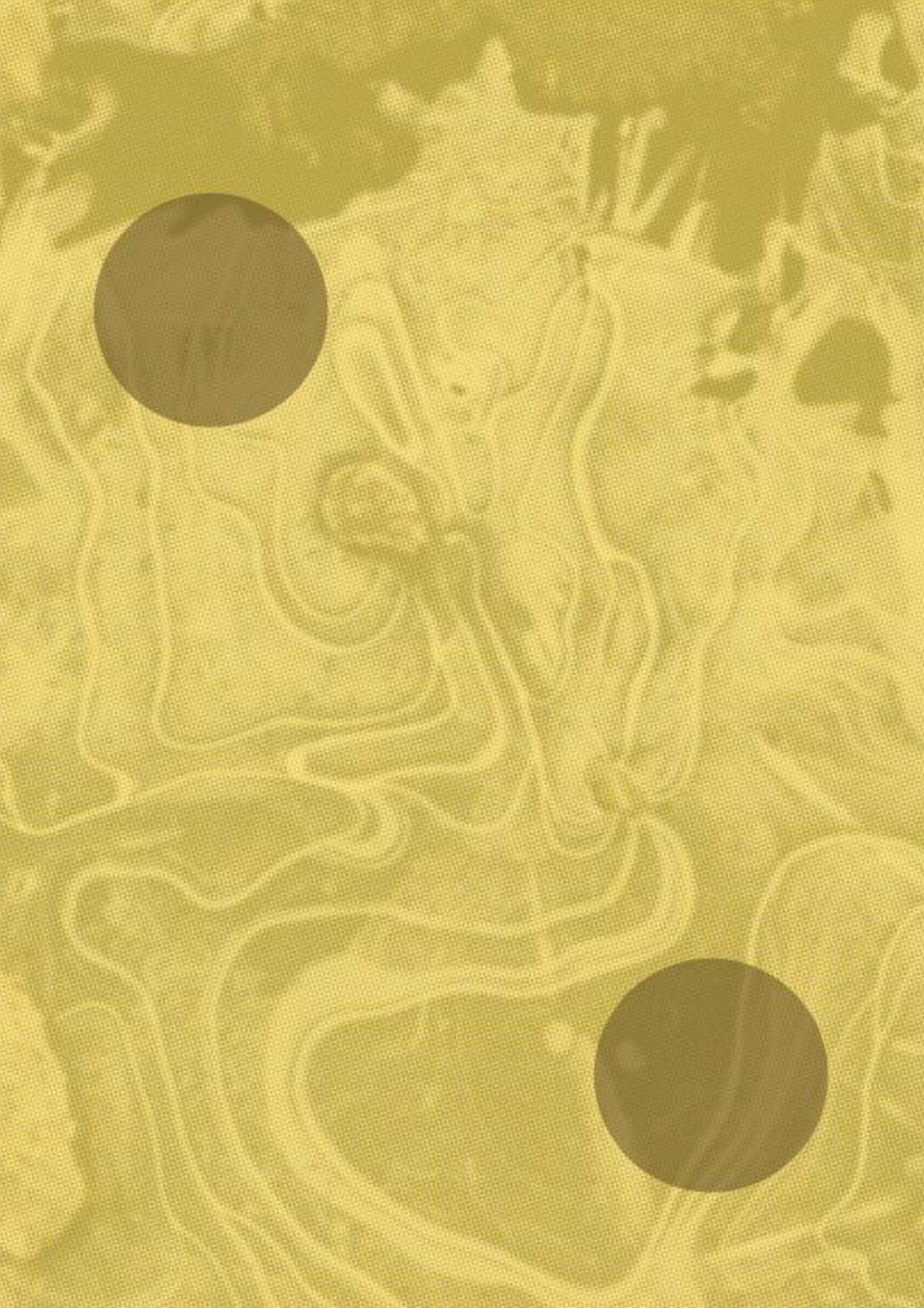
**MKHWANAZI:** It's been such a pleasure. Thank you Sarah and thank you very much for creating this space to speak about and reflect on my work so far. I'd also really like to extend my thanks to the wonderful colleagues that I have at WISER, who are intellectually generous and incessantly curious.



**CHILDBIRTH, NATALITY AND “YOUNG” FAMILIES**  
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**Nolwazi Mkhwanazi** is an Associate Professor in Medical Anthropology at WISER. She leads the Institute's programme in Medical Humanities. She is the co-editor and co-author, amongst many other publications, of *Young Families: Gender, Sexuality and Care* and of *Connected Lives: Families, Households, Health and Care in Contemporary South Africa*.

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