# THE WISER TRANSCRIPTS

Compiled by Tinashe Mushakavanhu

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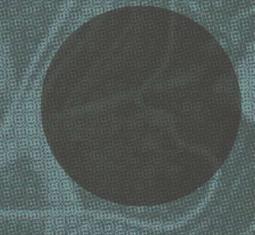
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The members of the Podcast Group at WiSER are Sarah Nuttall, Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, Isabel Hofmeyr, Bronwyn Kotzen, Mpho Matsipa, Achille Mbembe and Tinashe Mushakavanhu.





# #Batch 5\*

i. People, Pathogens and Technology Richard Rottenburg

ii. Urban green spaces during COVID-19Melanie Boehi, Luciano Concheiro San Vicente & PhakamaniAfrika Xaba

iii. Melancholy in the time of pandemicSakiru Adebayo

iv. The Redistributed UniversitySarah Nuttall

<sup>\*</sup>In this batch of transcripts WiSER scholars and fellows reflect on the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on mental health,technology, ecology and institutions.

# 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** 

PEOPLE, PATHOGENS AND TECHNOLOGY RICHARD ROTTENBURG

# PEOPLE, PATHOGENS AND TECHNOLOGY 1 RICHARD ROTTENBURG

Given that the current pandemic is in its fifth month, it is not surprising that more and more people are beginning to think about the time to come after it. In this moment of uncertainty and anxiety it seems unavoidable to reflect on the "new normality" we might face and particularly about the potential chances the crisis might entail for us. I follow this trend and speak about the cohabitation of humans, pathogens and technologies.

First, I want to affirm that the way and the speed with which most countries reacted to the outbreak is first of all an achievement. It was made possible mainly by four things:

- the institutionalisation of the universal human right to health,
- the establishment of an effective network of organisations under the leadership of the World Health Organisation,
- the agreement on a certain scientific expertise with its methods and,
- last but not least, the sobering fact that Covid-19 first affected mainly well-off people whose interests are best represented everywhere in the world.

This approach saved innumerable lives in those countries where it was implemented in due time. At the same time, the virus caused a situation of radical scientific and deep existential uncertainty. We find ourselves practicing "ground zero empiricism", as Lorraine Daston has called it, and we fear that we might currently be experiencing the beginning of a tectonic shift to something we cannot imagine. I will unfold my argument referring to the contemporary ground zero situation in four steps. I'll speak about the figuration of modernity, ask about a new figuration for the 21st century, and then come to pathogens and finally to technologies.

#### The Figuration of Modernity

The basic script of the methodology implemented to deal with the current pandemic is born out of the figuration of modernity. This figuration emerged in the 17th century across a few countries in Europe and has since developed further, slowly colonizing first the whole of Europe and then the entire world. The effort to colonize worked to erase other forms of relating to the world; again, first in Europe and then around the world. According to the foundational assumption of this core figuration of modernity, the reality of pathogens lies "out there" in nature and can be objectively grasped by the natural sciences speaking in their names "in here" in society by deploying their technologies.

Following this foundational assumption, the institutional and epistemic network called upon by governments for advice on how to manage the Covid-19 pandemic in its early days included virologists, epidemiologists, statisticians, and computational scientists. Looking at at this selection of expertise is like looking at Wittgenstein's famous "duckrabbit"—a simple drawing that at one glance shows a duck and at the other glance a rabbit. In the selection of expertise for the pandemic one can either immediately recognize a "rabbit": namely, a logical decision beyond question. Or, one can spontaneously see a "duck": namely, a decision that is puzzling against the backdrop of several older health disasters where the medical expertise came second after economic and political interests.

# PEOPLE, PATHOGENS AND TECHNOLOGY RICHARD ROTTENBURG

Similarly, we can recognize every day how timely deployment of the relevant methodology works and saves lives. Tragically, we can even observe how a late and hesitant deployment like in the USA proves the chosen procedure right. This can give us a sense of certainty and hope. To stay within the picture: we instantly recognize a "rabbit". But at the same time, we cannot avoid but to experience a deep uncertainty about the virus and the dynamics of the pandemic. Its far-reaching consequences continue to unfold in front of our eyes and the uncertainty gets ever deeper. Hence, we instantly recognize a "duck".

This unmediated back-and-forth between "rabbit" and "duck" when looking at one and the same picture opens a space for reflections beyond the immediate crisis. The unique experience of being in a moratorium additionally nudges us into radical reflections. Some of us are de-accelerated and in a privileged reflective mode, health workers and other experts are accelerated up to the point of collapse, and yet others—who cannot stay at home because they would have nothing to eat—are thrown into desperate situations that raise radical questions about injustice.

#### A New Figuration for the 21st Century?

Some of the reflections that come to mind go back to older debates about climate change and environmental degradation. These debates already prompted the emergence of a new figuration meant to replace the one at the heart of modernity. However, this newly emerging figuration has had little impact until now. Its foundational assumption is that nature and society are in fact not separate ontological realms but inextricably intertwined and coproduced.

Relating to pathogens, this means that they only take on a certain form through their interactions with many different forces, just as these forces themselves take on new forms through their interactions with the virus and with each other. One of these forces is the scientific representation that enacts a pathogen and—to bring the point home—will normally enact it differently after more or less years of further research. The reference to the one and only objective and timeless nature of the pathogen as "discovered" at some point in time needs to be understood differently within the framework of the emergent new figuration.

Starting from the foundational assumption that nature and society are not ontologically separate domains but inextricably intertwined and co-produced implies that the reality of an entity—for instance a pathogen—is multiple.

This is a complicated argument that I need to simplify. Here is one possible way to make it accessible. Similar to what has already happened in China, South Korea, and elsewhere, people in more countries may soon download an application on their smartphones, in which they insert their SARS-CoV-2 status. People who have been tested positive would enter for example (this is freely invented): "SARS-CoV-2\_positive". The phone would then automatically exchange information via Bluetooth with all the phones it encounters. This would again automatically create a network of all encounters, significantly speeding up and increasing the accuracy of tracking the spread of Covid-19.

Following the same logic, one could determine whether people with antibodies are really immune. This and similar technological approaches obviously have many technical, legal and moral presuppositions and consequences that are currently hotly debated.

## PEOPLE, PATHOGENS AND TECHNOLOGY RICHARD ROTTENBURG

The virus that becomes real through similar technological apparatuses is related to but not identical with the one that becomes real through a polymerase chain reaction test (PCR). The digital representation of the virus again becomes different by becoming entangled with different forces in its digital life. Societies that protect themselves against the virus by deploying such technological equipment and legal regulations accept different degrees of restricting the privacy of their citizens. After a while, they become significantly different from societies that do not use such equipment.

Asserting that the virus is multiple does not imply that the multiple representations have nothing to do with each other. However, it does imply that the different expressions that the virus takes on through its multiple human descriptions and technological processings cannot be deduced from a single, underlying objective and timeless reality—such as a genetic nucleus. The different manifestations are no longer perceived as standing in a logical hierarchy with one of them being situated at the bottom and all the others being deducible step by step from it. They are rather conceived as standing side by side.

Since the debates about the "ozone hole" during the 1980s and now global warming, climate change, biodiversity, ecological degradation and eventually the Anthropocene, an increasing number of voices from all disciplines argue that the ontological separation of nature and society is the root of a fundamental error. Some of these voices go further and state that this error is the cause behind the destructive human practices that threaten to end all life on this planet. Lately, advocates of this position gather around a few concepts such as "One Health" and "Interspecies Cohabitation".

Even if every now and again some of these positions are attacked as being hostile to science, and some perhaps really exaggerate with their claims, they are actually trying to make an argument in support of better science. What really matters for them is that human health cannot be achieved or even understood without the health of the planet. The human body is not a biologically isolated entity.

#### **Pathogens**

Like bacteria, viruses live within certain environments, such as in oceans and in digestive tracts of mammals. Accordingly, they also exist in our gastro-intestinal tract, where they play an indispensable role for the digestion and the immune system. Some bacteriophagous viruses do this by keeping bacteria in check and thus they maintain the necessary balance within the intestinal flora. A living body, and thus also a human body, appears in this perspective as an assemblage of different species. This assemblage has no fixed and impermeable boundary towards the environment of the body, but rather lives from its selective permeability and adaptability.

Few viruses are harmful to humans, and only very few are particularly dangerous after they have managed to jump from one species to another—for example from a bat to a human. Assuming that we will be back to some version of our pre-moratorium normality, we can be sure that due to further ecological degradation, further crowding of humans and animals, and also due to the increasing density of cities, there will be more viruses that cross species in the near future. And

# PEOPLE, PATHOGENS AND TECHNOLOGY RICHARD ROTTENBURG

due to increased mobility around the world, these viruses will again be all over the world within a few weeks.

The emergence of a new figuration with a different foundational assumption about the assemblage of nature and society calls for a paradigm shift that has deep implications for inherited notions about living in harmony with nature. One of them is that the "back to nature" makes no sense when nature is no longer conceived as a distinct ontological realm. This again has important implications for how to conceive a more and sustainable cohabitation with pathogens and with technologies.

#### **Technologies**

It was only within the figuration of modernity that one could have assumed, first, that nature was a reality "out there" and we as humans with our technologies "in here" and, second, that we had to either dominate it or subjugate ourselves to its domination over us. Under this assumption it seemed that one could opt either for control or subjugation. Yet within the emergent figuration for the 21st century, asserting these two opposing alternatives is wrong. And if that is the case, the development of a vaccine as a technology against SARS-CoV-2 can perfectly well be part of a radically redefined interspecies cohabitation. For this reason, the similarity between the new figuration and pre-modern figurations is misleading.

This observation is also related to justice. The reduction of victims is indeed the overall objective and the most important indicator of success of an intervention. Yet, the distribution of victims across different parts of a population and of humanity at large is an equally important indicator. One among several factors causing highly unequal distributions is access to health services and medication. Perhaps the most urgent thing at the current moment of crisis is the development of affordable testing facilities, medication and a vaccine against the virus for all people on earth.

Making drugs is extremely expensive and, in the current economic system, largely financed through the capital market. Within this system, drugs and vaccines only needed for the duration of a pandemic are not profitable for the pharmaceutical companies. Accordingly, the necessary and enormous financial resources cannot easily be generated via the capital market. Related debates and negotiations are currently running hot.

The existing capitalist mode of financing pharmaceutical solutions contains several built-in mechanisms of long-term triage. These forms of triage regularly cause far more victims among disadvantaged populations each year than the current pandemic ever will. This long-known fact—for which the world has not yet been locked down—also shows that a pandemic is neither a natural disaster nor a purely medical issue.

I want to conclude by stating that within the new figuration for the 21st century, working on the development of medication and vaccination cannot be seen to contradict the more fundamental endeavour to redesign the cohabitation of people and pathogens. It is rather part of it—cohabitation includes humans, pathogens and technologies.

**Richard Rottenburg** is an Anthropologist of Science and Technology and Professor at WiSER. His many-acclaimed works include Far Fetched Facts and The World of Indicators.

URBAN GREEN SPACES DURING COVID-19
MELANIE BOEHI, LUCIANO CONCHEIRO SAN
VICENTE & PHAKAMANI AFRIKA XABA

# URBAN GREEN SPACES DURING COVID-19 <sup>2</sup> MELANIE BOEHI, LUCIANO CONCHEIRO SAN VICENTE & PHAKAMANI AFRIKA XABA

**MELANIE BOEHI:** Many botanical gardens and public parks were closed during efforts to stop the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. For me, this closure has been a moment to think about what is missing when public green spaces are closed, who is missing out and what role they will play in the future. To explore these questions, I recently invited Phakamani m'Afrika Xaba and Luciano Concheiro San Vicente for a conversation on Zoom. I first met Phakamani in 2011 during my research about the history of Kirstenbosch and Luciano in 2019. I have learned a lot from both of them about botanical gardens, parks and plants and they continue to inspire me to think critically and creatively about them. By inviting them for a joint conversation, I was especially interested in finding out how their observations and experiences in South Africa and Mexico relate to each other. Hi Phakamani, hi Luciano.

**LUCIANO VICENTE:** Hello, how are you?

PHAKAMANI XABA: I'm well as well.

**BOEHI:** Thank you so much for making time for this conversation. I would like you to start with quick introductions of the places where you work.

XABA: Yes, and thank you Melanie. Kirstenbosch is a well renowned botanical garden. It's one of eleven botanical gardens that are a network, then it's a flagship. It's over a hundred years old. There's quite interesting and important collections here, living plants collections. We also house a herbarium and a very strong research component. Within the garden we have conservation displays and education, and research as our main sort of focus. Kirstenbosch is one of those few botanical gardens that is self-sufficient economically, financially, as it generates a self-sustaining income. Although now after COVID-19 I don't think we will. We get over 1.1 million visitors a year, so I think that will diminish significantly and will impact on us immensely.

**VICENTE:** Well, Chapultepec is the biggest urban park in Mexico City. Its origins goes back to pre-colonial times, because it was used as the main source of pure water by the Aztecs since the 15th century, and it maintained like that until the 19th century, when it was also transformed into a typical modern urban park. Nowadays it is one of our landmarks, and inside it, there are some of the most important museums in Mexico, such as the National Museum of Anthropology and other types of recreational spaces. Now, the President decided to establish a new program to take care again of Chapultepec that is being led by the artist Gabriel Orozco.

**BOEHI:** Phakamani, Kirstenbosch has been closed since the beginning of the national lockdown in South Africa in March 2020, and it has just reopened, I heard, on Monday, on the 3rd of August. You have been working at Kirstenbosch throughout this time. Can you tell us a bit about how that has been?

**XABA:** Ja, since Kirstenbosch has been closed since the end of March, it's been both good in a way and bad. The good part is the serenity, maybe that's a bit selfish of me, living here. I've

প্ৰেপৰ্মীs was broadcast as Episode 13, Season 1 on 6 August 2020. Boehi discusses botanical gardens and public parks in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic with Luciano Concheiro San Vicente and Phakamani m'Afrika Xaba.

# URBAN GREEN SPACES DURING COVID-19 MELANIE BOEHI, LUCIANO CONCHEIRO SAN VICENTE & PHAKAMANI AFRIKA XABA

seen this space so empty and just the biodiversity thriving. There're so many owls, mongoose, cats, rooikats that are here on the estate and the abundance of bird life that one would witness. It was pretty awesome. Obviously, the sad thing is that very few people can enjoy that. It's a bit of a catch 22 situation where you have this wonderful biodiversity that people cannot necessarily enjoy.

**BOEHI:** Luciano what about you? Mexico has also been hard hit by Covid-19. Have you been able to go to the park during this time?

**VICENTE:** The park was closed for some days and after it was the public parks, some of the spaces that were first open and for me, one thing that the pandemic did was to highlight the urgency for green public spaces, especially for those who have less, they are really important places. They have always been, but I think now, with the radical transformation of our daily lives, the importance of green spaces have become more clear. For me, nowadays the most important thing is to think about how to make the park accessible for more people, how more people can enjoy this and take the park as part of their daily lives.

**BOEHI:** How accessible is the park during normal times, as I understand you're in the middle of the city? Has everybody access to it?

**VICENTE:** Yeah, the park is in the middle of the city and has nearly 15 million visitors every year. But at the same time it's interesting because some parts of the park are much more accessible than others, and those parts are the ones which are close to the richest neighborhoods. The other neighborhoods don't have as good access as the others. A new project for Chapultepec should think how we can make Chapultepec accessible for everyone. That means important transformations of changing avenues and streets and opening access. Another important project is to make the internal connection of the park better because nowadays you have big avenues crossing around the park because it's 800 hectares and now we're building walkable spaces, so you can cross from one part to the other. We're building bridges

**BOEHI:** Phakamani, I think accessibility to Kirstenbosch is also something that has been highlighted by the pandemic. Even without the pandemic, not everybody who lives in Cape Town has access to Kirstenbosch. Historically, Kirstenbosch was established in 1913, as a site of leisure and a site of education for white South Africans, and black South Africans weren't imagined as part of its public, they were supposed to be laborers, but not visitors. And to this day, black visitors have remained a minority. Other reasons for this were apartheid spatial urban planning and the lack of public transport and high entrance fees. What are your ideas for making the botanical garden more accessible and more inclusive in the future?

**XABA:** Of course, these are still major challenges here. The space is still in that same construct of the apartheid spatial planning. It is in a very rich neighborhood and accessibility is still a challenge. And the sort of majority of the people who visit are still very privileged, white people in our country, and, of course, the tourists. But we haven't been as relevant to black communities as we can be. We've got a really good educational program whereby we have a bus that brings school children in. And a few years ago, we had a really interesting outreach greening program.

# URBAN GREEN SPACES DURING COVID-19 MELANIE BOEHI, LUCIANO CONCHEIRO SAN VICENTE & PHAKAMANI AFRIKA XABA

We've started a conversation on these things on how we can actually bring people of color into the garden by perhaps investigating charges to the garden that are related to income, because currently getting into Kirstenbosch is pretty expensive for a normal South African. While lowering prices, it still doesn't solve the problem of accessibility, because the communities are so far removed from here. If ever you had to drive 30 kilometres to come here, it's expensive and of course there's no public transport that comes to Kirstenbosch. Perhaps that should be one of the conversations to be had as well.

**VICENTE:** This is very interesting because in a way it's thinking the whole configuration of the cities around the parks now how we can think them not as a faraway place to go one day in your life but really have to think to internalize them and become a central part of our lives.

**BOEHI:** There are some other aspects of botanical gardens and of public parks that the pandemic has highlighted for me. One is biodiversity conservation, research and education. In the context of the pandemic. We know that viruses like the SARS-coronavirus-2 that is causing the Covid-19 disease are likely to evolve in places and situations where biodiversity has been disturbed and habitat has been [destroyed]. And the other issue is food security. In many places, food insecurity has become a big problem during the pandemic. And here I'm thinking of botanical gardens and public parks with their collections of plants, the know-how in how to grow them, if they can contribute more to society?

**XABA:** Yes, I think we have to really be more relevant to society. Some education, some conservation has started, particularly the restoration around fynbos and we have started some of the cycads within our work, but there's not enough work that has been explored in that. And it's a very different type of work, because it requires certain restoration protocols. So we're setting up all those things and it's going to take a while to change that, to become restoration sort of centres and think along that.

**VICENTE:** Well, I think that this problem of food security and food insecurity has been very important and also a discussion about how we eat and what we eat. I have been discussing with some friends if urban parks in a way should be also productive parks. If we could change that notion of the urban park as a merely space for recreation, and what would it mean to transform some parts for producing plants and crops, edible plants and crop, or medicinal plants. I think in a way, it's interesting, because it's also thinking the non-industrial agriculture as a way to protect biodiversity.

**BOEHI:** That's very interesting and it reminds me of the Useful Plants Garden at Kirstenbosch. Phakamani, can you tell us a bit more about the Useful Plants Garden and the work you're doing there?

**XABA:** The Useful Plants Garden was started, it's almost 20 years now at Kirstenbosch and it's an idea that we had to bring all these plants that are used culturally, traditionally, whether they are food, crafts, medicine, construction, and so on, into one space and display them and more importantly, make them available to the general public through our seed department and through projects that we were involved with. However, I think this idea hasn't grown as much as

93

# URBAN GREEN SPACES DURING COVID-19 MELANIE BOEHI, LUCIANO CONCHEIRO SAN VICENTE & PHAKAMANI AFRIKA XABA

it can. I think it's more relevant now given the circumstance, there's so many plants that have been under-studied or under-explored, and this possibly might be a chance to do so.

**BOEHI:** I also think the Useful Plants Garden is important because it was really a powerful intervention in the setup of Kirstenbosch as a botanical garden that followed a Western, Eurocentric order of knowledge and understanding of plants. And the Useful Plants Garden really was planned as an intervention in that as setting an Afrocentric focus in the middle of the garden. And as such, it really is the starting point for reimagining the botanical garden.

**XABA:** I think the definition of botanical garden, obviously, it's a very Eurocentric way of looking at it. It doesn't resonate with what people generally here identify with. It doesn't identify with that space. I think more what is needed is to have activities that resonate with people. So I think we in previously colonized countries or areas need to redefine those spaces for ourselves in say what we want them to be, rather than to conform to some standard, which doesn't necessarily serve our country or our needs.

**VICENTE:** I completely agree because at the end for me, to think radically around the parks and gardens and botanical gardens and ethnobotanical gardens is, is to think around the problem of life and of maintaining life, and this means always multiple types of life, not only a single way to think of life, but multiple and to always try to think from the deeply local context. And this is, again, something that plants teach us, like plants grow in a very specific context and with very specific needs. That doesn't mean that we cannot learn from other contexts because, in a way, they're at the same time universal teachings. No, but I think it's important to think from, from as we say in Spanish, from the *terruño*, from the soil, from the earth, from our own earth.

**BOEHI:** Luciano and Phakamani, I thank you very much for this very interesting conversation. I also want to thank the people who helped me making this podcast. Jayne Batzofin for instructions on how to build an improvised recording studio, Neo Muyanga for advice on audio editing, Percy Zvomuya for organizing a recording device, and Oscar Masinyana, for allowing me to use his internet connection. I also thank the WiSER Podcast team for their feedback and for hosting this episode. The music you heard is 'Rooibos' by Cara Stacey and Camilo Àngeles.

**Melanie Boehi** is a Visiting Researcher at WiSER and a Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) Postdoctoral Fellow. She is currently finalising a book about the history of the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in Cape Town and doing research about journalist Ruth Weiss.

**Phakamani m'Afrika Xaba** is a senior horticulturalist and researcher based at the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in Cape Town. He is the co-author of the book *Traditionally Useful Plants of Africa: Their Cultivation and Use* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

**Luciano Concheiro San Vicente** holds a Ph.D. in history from The National Autonomous University of Mexico and an M.Phil in Sociology from Cambridge University. He is currently doing research about the history of Chapultepec, Mexico's most important urban park.

MELANCHOLY IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC SAKIRU ADEBAYO

# MELANCHOLY IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC 3 SAKIRU ADEBAYO

In this podcast I'm going to be talking about what I'm describing as Covid-19 melancholy. I am going to be taking you through a personal journey, my own dealings with melancholy and how that led to an intellectual pursuit of melancholy, and then what it means to think about melancholy in the time of a pandemic.

There are a thousand and one ways to define melancholy. It can be used to describe a person's state of mind, a cultural moment, a political temper, a literary technique and even a personality trait. Speaking of personality traits, my friends have always called out my personal melancholic nature and, in praise of melancholy, I always respond by saying that it is the nature of creative people to be melancholic. I would often quote Nietzsche who said that a certain amount of melancholy is essential to the soul. Little did I know that the subject would come to occupy my thinking for four years as a doctoral fellow in South Africa.

I was born in a relatively small town called Ijebu-Igbo, Nigeria. It was where I spent my entire childhood and memories of those days always come to me with so much fondness. But I spent my formative and adult years in Ibadan, one of Nigeria's most popular and populous cities. I had my Undergraduate and Masters degrees at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria's premier university.

I worked in the same city for a few years before relocating to South Africa. My preoccupation with the question of home started after my relocation to South Africa. While I am not currently homeless, I often feel unhomed. I worry about these occasional feelings of tenuous belongings, but in all I've come to realise that sometimes home is a fragile illusion – a dazzling mirage.

I left my home country with a truckload of happiness and expectations. I left home knowing full well that the proof of one's education is not only in degree certificates, but also in the experience of travelling—in the experience of exploring the world. Not very long after my relocation to South Africa, it dawned on me that the experience of migration in and of itself is based upon the structure of grief because when one leaves home, one must grief a host of concrete and abstract losses.

It is after you leave home that home becomes a question. It is after you leave home that home becomes an object of a romanticised longing and an effusive nostalgia. It was after I read Dinaw Mengestu's Children of the Revolution that I finally diagnosed myself with what I am describing as 'Immigrant Melancholia'. This of course speaks of the power of literature to point out the universality and specificity of human experiences, as well as the relationality of identities.

Dinaw Mengestu's novel is about an Ethiopian man by the name Sepha who fled to America during the Ethiopian Revolution of the 1970s. After seventeen years in America Sepha asks himself, "How did I end up here? What is the grand narrative of my life?" At another moment he asked himself, "How was I supposed to live in America when I had not left Ethiopia?" The situation of Sepha is very, very different from my situation. Sepha is an involuntary migrant in America while I am in South Africa on a study visa, but his experience opened my eyes to the wints wing the soul of property installed and the mostic, especially in the time of a pandemic.

## MELANCHOLY IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC SAKIRU ADEBAYO

immigrants, whether voluntary or involuntary, have to confront. It reveals how the experience of willful and unwillful displacement follows a similar psychic logic. Dinaw Mengestu's novel was part of the novels that I analysed in my PhD, which was on 'The Representation of Memory in Post-Conflict African Narratives'.

I realised at the very initial stage of my PhD that the question of memory, especially in post-conflict contexts is also a question of mourning. The question of mourning, in the way Sigmund Freud articulates it, is a question of melancholy. In fact, it was in my chapter on South Africa that I discovered that post-apartheid literary works gesture towards an idea of memory and melancholia as a social practice. They suggest that the multi-layered sense of loss that characterises post-apartheid South Africa turns melancholia into an affective structure of the everyday. It is also from these South African literary works that I discovered that melancholia is not simply an inability to mourn the past, but also an inability to be consoled by history. But this is not my concern in this podcast. In this podcast I want to bring my four years of thinking about melancholy to bear in this time of a pandemic. I want to talk about melancholy in the regime of the viral.

Since the lockdown began, many remarkable things have happened in my life, most notably of which is that I finished my PhD. It is also remarkable that I have been forced to sit with my thoughts and to sit by myself for an unbearably long period of time. I have been made to reckon with the monotony of my own forlornness. The joy of completing a PhD was almost consumed by the overwhelming sense of isolation, but these melancholic moments have made me consider the broader social, psychological and political anatomy of melancholy in the age of Covid-19.

I want to weigh in on these melancholic moments during the pandemic. I want to map out those moments when the socio-political temper was nothing but melancholic. For the purpose of this podcast, my understanding of melancholy is guided by what Robert Burton in his book, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, describes as 'an amalgam of fear, grief, loss and dying'.

Because of the numerous wars that mark the 20th century, many scholars refer to it as 'the century of catastrophe'. I wonder if it is rather too early to tag the 21st century as a 'century of despair' because while we are still dealing with the atrocities of the previous century, we are also faced with the gory effects of climate change. In addition to that we have had to deal with the Swine Flu, Ebola, SAS and now Covid-19. If I wouldn't be exaggerating, it is almost as if we are witnessing a real life re-enactment of Daniel Defoe's *A journal of a plague year*, or Albert Camus' *The plague*—except that at this point in time the plague is not limited to London or the French-Algerian city of Oran, it is a global plague. The year 2020 slaps our precarity in our faces and makes us, more than ever, to reckon with our interconnected but unequally distributed vulnerabilities. Perhaps what is more troubling than the existence of coronavirus is that we do not know all the facts about the virus. Besides the microscopic nature of the virus, the virus seems to thrive and is shrouded in mystery. Scientists are still discovering and re-examining the modes of transmission, potential mutations and immunity

to the virus. Accompanied with this is the Infodemic of Misinformation that is inflicted on us by the media. The question of the media—what is said and what is not said - feeds into our feelings of fear and outrage. We are overcome with a pervading sense of confusion and uncertainty. Our lack of a clear, cognitive mapping of the virus has led to the sad realization that everything is not under control—the sad realisation that the world in its current form is disappearing.

As a consequence, we have seen a dramatic increase in cases of depression, anxiety and suicide on a global level. At first our response to the virus was a kind of paranoia, which found expression in 'panic-buying' and needless hoardings. From there we reclined into a season of melancholy. The isolation brought upon us by the lockdown aggravated the melancholic atmosphere. There was a kind of social, and even cultural moroseness that accompanied our state of immobility, and I invoke the word 'immobility' here in all its ramifications.

The pandemic is apparently not just an epidemiological crisis, it is also a political, existential, and an economic crisis. Scholars have talked about how the pandemic creates an economic contraction which will inevitably be followed by a global financial crisis. Many economies are under severe pressure which, if care is not taken, might make us relive the Great Depression of the 1930s. The World Bank estimates that as many as sixty million people globally will be pushed into extreme poverty. The impact of Covid-19 has again revealed to us the stark structural inequalities in our world. It has again exposed the failures of neoliberalism for everyone who cares to notice. We are also witnessing the violence of disaster capitalism on the already depressed labour markets.

Besides the economic depression, we are also witnessing a melancholy of politics, or what might be called political melancholy. The mystifying nature of the virus has led to inconsistent national policies. For instance, at some point in South Africa and many other countries, we were moving back and forth in the stages of the lockdown. Perhaps the more pressing challenge is that the battle against the pandemic is becoming longer than expected and as a result many countries are beginning to experience a response fatigue due to the mounting socio-economic pressures.

The unprecedented scale of loss on individual and national levels is another source of Covid-19 Melancholy. Many people have lost their jobs, lost a loved one, lost their sense of peace and security, but most importantly their sense of normality. As Slajov Zizek puts it, "The reality we are living in is dissolving. It is no longer the same world, so people are at a loss." How do we even begin to collectively mourn these losses?

This sense of loss becomes compounded when we realise that there are more losses waiting for us post-Covid. The weight of our losses would only begin to be felt after Covid-19 is behind us. Our current state of grief is then complicated with another kind of grief—an anticipatory grief. We are subliminally grieving what we have not yet lost and we are grieved by the uncertainty of our collective future. We are in some sort of pre-traumatic stage where we see or imagine flash-forwards of the worst case scenarios.

## MELANCHOLY IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC SAKIRU ADEBAYO

Another Covid-19 question would be: "What does it mean to live in the time of dying?" We seem to be under a cloud of death. We are overcome by the strange smell of death, the ominous festival of dying. Funeral parlors are overwhelmed and coffin-makers are unable to meet the rise in demand for coffins. As someone said, "In the end and at its core, the corona crisis is about death – our deep-seated fear of death." This harvest of death is compounded with the fact that many people are forced to do funerals in isolation. Many are left in solitary grief.

As I speak, things are gradually becoming stabilised in South Africa, although there is a looming fear of a second-wave of infections, but I still cannot dust off my struggle to envision a post-Covid future. For now, all I see is a future pregnant with uncertainties, but also a future begging for foresightedness. As I make this podcast I have asked myself over and over again – "Are we still in a state of melancholy?" Maybe, or maybe not, but I do know that there are different stages of grief and we are still grieving. I do know that melancholy is not necessarily in the now. It is in the inventory of losses that we are yet to come to terms with. It is in the anticipated reckonings that have been postponed to a post-Covid time scale. Maybe it is just my very melancholic nature that makes me read the current socio-political climate as gloomy. Maybe it is why I fail to see an exciting post-Covid world. Only time can tell.

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THE REDISTRIBUTED UNIVERSITY
SARAH NUTTALL

# THE REDISTRIBUTED UNIVERSITY SARAH NUTTALL

For quite some time, I have been thinking and writing about what I have called 'the redistributed university'. By that I have meant the ways in which the university as an institution has been changing—distributing itself differently, it seems to me—in relation to multiple pressures and struggles, including economic pressures, struggles for social justice and rapid technological change.

Redistribution is in the first instance a theory of economic justice; the term may also connote the building of a system of reciprocities within a collective. I draw on it too, to think about how an institution might come to distribute its component parts across time and space, from the sense of where and what it perceives its inside and its outside to be, to its contested and shifting place in historical time, to the phased parameters of its offline and online existence. There will be time in what follows to expand on these ideas.

But what I'd like to consider first in this podcast is the sense of where we are now, after seven months of a global pandemic, specifically at Wits University but also at so many other universities around the world. How can we think about the silent university of this unprecedented year of 2020, the dormant or hibernating university—in contrast, not least, to the university of five years ago to the month, when students on South African university campuses rose in vociferous protest against the new-old status quo, against the university as it had become, and failed to become, in the forceful analytic glare of generational critique.

Where are the continuities between then and now, I wonder; and where are the breaks, turning on the new conditions of the epidemiological, the multiple lives of a pathogen and its outbreak phenomena. It's too soon to tell, as academics are fond of saying, but let me try to work with this, at least as a question, concretely and somewhat speculatively, across this podcast.

Wits University, like many universities around the world, shut abruptly and completely in late March. Eunice Vilakazi, who has been a cleaner in the Richard Ward building where WiSER is located, for more than eight years, was, like the rest of the University's staff, and its students, summarily sent home. She didn't leave her small house in Soweto, 'not even into the back yard', she says, for more than a month. The streets around her were utterly silent, as never before; police appeared sometimes, on patrol. "It never occurred to us", she said, "that everything would get stuck".

Confined by one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, Eunice was called back on rotation to Wits several months later. When she arrived, she was one of only three workers on the University's upper East campus. She found cats crossing the courtyards and small animals that she likened to fluffy rats scuffling in the piles of autumn leaves stacking up against buildings. These were dassies, small furry animals that most Johannesburg people, including me, thought lived only on Table Mountain. Eunice found the silence fearful. Over the weeks, as cleaners were redefined as essential workers, Eunice's rotation on the East Campus grew from 3 to 7 to 12 people, but she still cleaned mostly in silence. Cleaning itself had taken on a new significance: as Catriona Lally, a cleaner turned essential worker at Trinity College, Dublin wrote in a Covid-19 Blog post I read online, "it will doubtless be done more often and more extensively and I reflect—having lost a job in a previous recession—that at least I may be in a harder the production of the production of the production of the redistributed university. Using Covid-19 as a point of departure, she considers new and older challenges that have contributed to redefining institutions of higher learning.

Three years earlier, Eunice Vilakazi had been insourced at Wits, a direct outcome and negotiated victory of student-worker protests in 2016. Now with a better salary and an option to send her children to Wits, she enjoyed coming to work. The difference, she said, no longer being outsourced, was that you didn't feel constantly that you "could be dismissed for some small infringement, some idea that you weren't doing your job properly. And the terrible stress of that".

Student movements in late 2015 and 2016 had fought to undo lingering colonial and apartheid legacies in the present, to drag universities away from their still-standing colonial statues in some instances, their remaining racially skewed staffing structures, their insufficiently Africa-based curricula, their outdated art collections, the un-reconsidered names of their buildings; their fee structures and their outsourcing of workers. These struggles operated along the timelines of a redistributive logics deeply invested in social justice.

They were struggles, too, over the politics of time, over the temporal order of things. Including the dismantling or strong contestation of the widely used rubric of 'post-apartheid', redistributing its parts—insisting, as a potent politics of negation, as Adorno would have put, that what had been taken by many to be the past is not past but coeval with the present. Such struggles took place in the context of rising inequality, and on the terrain of what Jean and John Comaroff have termed the 'neoliberated South Africa'.

In the years leading up to student protests in South Africa, academic conferences and debates had begun to proliferate on the state of the university today. These were taking place here, but also elsewhere in the world. Many of these debates involved contestations about what constituted their inside and their outside, about how to straddle the often harsh boundaries between the university and what it had been, was and needed to become, and the society of which is was and was not a part; about the work of activist-scholars who worked to mitigate these boundaries, and how Universities could make their walls more porous. Discussions took place about whether the University could be an asylum of sorts from the harshness and immediacy of the social. And about how knowledge, in an advancing technological age, contributing to the growing crisis in the Humanities, was being driven increasingly by formations less circumscribed by institutions and disciplines, as it became more easily searchable, and the University a node in a network. Universities were also being literally redistributed across the globe, as private universities. No longer the study abroad sites of the post-cold war era of 'area studies', these were now full degree-granting campuses, ones which tended to ignore their local contexts, and to relegate the concerns of the social as such to their outside.

Public universities on the African continent had since the 70s, in many cases been "Africanized" but they were also in debt. Faculty salaries had often been cut; student bursaries fell away. A process of negative redistribution had unfolded, with numerous scholars adding to the brain drain or joining consultancies as a way to make ends meet. The number of private universities kept increasing. In all these ways, the university was coming under scrutiny and being directly contested as well.

## THE REDISTRIBUTED UNIVERSITY SARAH NUTTALL

Returning now to the dormant university of the present, or more accurately perhaps, the University in abeyance, waiting out a second wave, with much of the Southern academic year gone, we've seen how one of the key changes marking the pandemic university has been the definition of cleaning staff as even without the wages to show for it in some instances, has been the re-definition of cleaning staff as essential workers. But even as Eunice Vilakazi wanted the University back, to return to a physically present community she had struggled hard to win belonging to, the institution was in other ways taking flight. As essential workers came to work, other constituencies of the university had gone virtual, entered cyberspace more fully than ever before.

Compelled to take their classes online, students had been sent home under the national state of disaster, and were being taught on Whatsapp as often as on Microsoft Teams, where the wifi connection permitted it. Staff were teaching remotely, often for the first time and often under duress, and seminars became webinars, a new international knowledge commons apparently in the making.

As I make this podcast, some students have returned, especially those in their final years, and those who need labs and onsite facilities. Back from lockdown, curfew, prohibition and load shedding. South Africa's unique and suggestive euphemism for power cuts, and the quandaries of home. Most have been relieved to get back to the actual, physical, offline university, where they generally have more space, privacy, freedom, wifi and access to their teachers. Being back has been about access to resources, from more spacious living quarters in some instances to libraries, but also about an achieved focus on graduation (and then, the hope is, employment); being back has made that a more tangible possibility.

Yet many more students are still online, preparing to write exams with no physical contact with the place they took to be the site of learning. In this they ride a wave of change already well underway. As South Africa's economy falters further in the wake of this destructive pandemic, online learning will be cheaper and probably constitutive of the new order of things, the portal through which we walked in our obligatory masks. Perhaps it is now distance learning universities, traditionally serving people who would otherwise struggle to access higher learning – the incarcerated, the poor, older working people - that are suddenly better equipped in important ways than elite institutions, to continue in the face of Covidinduced disruptions.

WiSER's corridor has stood virtually empty now for its seven month. Office doors are closed shut, its seminar room stands silent, and sounds rising from Johannesburg's inner city just beyond remain more muted than usual. Often doubling up as a classroom, the meeting site of numerous reading groups, supervision committees, postgraduate presentations and public intellectual events, it's a room that is generally full of people.

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101

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Our books, all 55 of them, stand upright in their glass cabinet; our public archive of posters line our walls and pillars. We've generated academic research in the form of books and articles for almost twenty years, but also tried to convert it into many kinds of interventions,

## THE REDISTRIBUTED UNIVERSITY SARAH NUTTALL

remaking it as numerous forms of social intelligence. A critical public humanities archive of two decades, invested in social transformation, based less on a US model of outreach to a taken for granted 'community', more on a commitment to change that is also a redistribution of what knowledge is or can be and how we can access and build it.

Now we, like others, have learned to move much of our work, many of our discussions and public fora, online. As a recalibration of the knowledge economy happens before our eyes, speakers from five continents, for instance, can be instantly together on one's screen. Yet how long will it be before processes will be put in place, by the North if not the South, by which one will have to pay—to subscribe and pay—for access to these **for now** open access intellectual discussions, only exacerbating a digital divide already making itself felt? This is a discussion I've had with the Dean of the Faculty, Garth Stevens. We discuss how capital, resilient and elastic as always, finds ways to produce new layers of exclusion, along new orders of distribution. This seems one important site of new struggles.

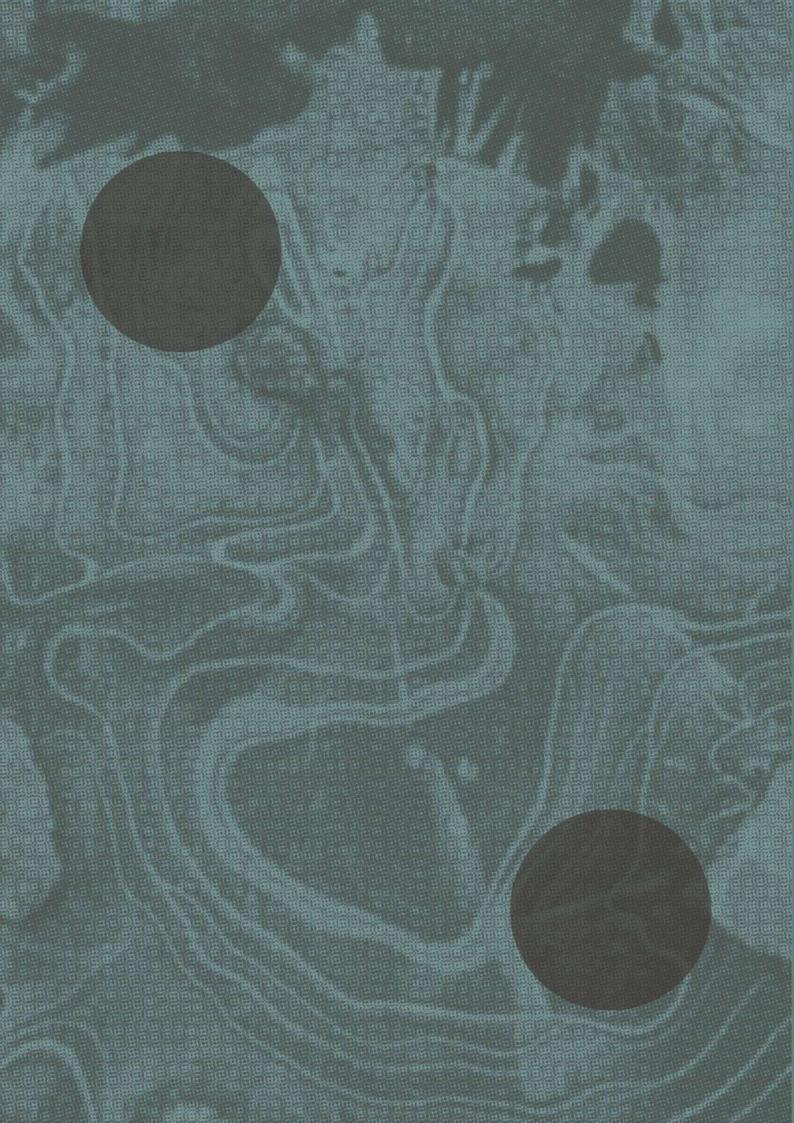
As I speculate on WiSER's for now silent corridor, I recall a conversation early in the day with a colleague based at a university in Mexico City. I asked him how things were and, amongst other things, he said: "before the pandemic, women, both students and staff, were protesting against ongoing gender discrimination on campus; they were doing so by occupying several buildings, intending to hold administrators to account. Suddenly, the campus was evacuated and shutdown and the buildings were empty: everybody gone. Long gone. The disarray is palpable".

I reflect on the ironies of the redistributed university now—of students and staff, not least, protesting discrimination by occupying buildings that are suddenly empty—for quite another reason. And on the new knowledge commons that appears but may not necessarily be, open to all. What happens, in this new terrain, to knowledge from the global South and its compromised regimes of knowledge distribution and dissemination? It does seem too soon to tell, though we might imagine how previous patterns may work on repeat. Would one possibility of the post-Covid university be a regional online university in Southern Africa? a collaborative university commons in which courses could be cross-listed and expertise redistributed?

The weeds are still long, the university bookstore remains undecided about reopening and the fountains below the Great Hall throw water upwards to a largely deserted auditorium of grass. Despite a few staff and students trickling back, including those whose conditions at home can be proved to be intolerable, the pandemic university largely prevails for now.

What stays with me, on the empty campus, at Africa's now leading higher education institution, is how much we need strong and enduring institutions. Even as they seem to want to fly off online or retreat into new forms of unequal exclusivity, we need to persistently harness them and hold them open, for the newest and oldest reasons.

Sarah Nuttall is Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies and the Director of WiSER. Her research focuses on literary and visual cultures, city lives and forms and critical cultural theory. She has authored or edited many influential books, published more than 60 articles and book chapters and her work is widely cited across disciplines. For eight years she has directed WiSER, one of the largest and most established Humanities Institutes across the global South.



FACING A YEAR OF CANCELLED WORKSHOPS AND SEMINARS, THE WITS INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH (WISER) TURNED TO PODCASTING. THE MAGIC OF THIS PODCAST IS HOW IT FACILITATES THE SHARING OF ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE IVORY TOWER. ITS FORMAT IS SIMPLE WITH ONLY ONE OR TWO GUESTS PER EPISODE KEEPING EACH SHORT AND FOCUSED. THIS ALLOWS FOR DENSE ACADEMIC TOPICS TO REMAIN DIGESTIBLE. WITH SOME OF SOUTH AFRICA'S FINEST MINDS TALKING ON TOPICS RANGING FROM HYDROCOLONIALISM TO MELANCHOLY, YOU'RE ABLE TO DIP IN AND OUT OF DIGITAL LECTURE HALLS AT YOUR OWN PACE.

DAILY MAVERICK