'Reflections on Lockdown'

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Reflections on lockdown

On 27 March 2020, South Africa officially entered a 21-day lockdown to limit the spread of the COVID-19 disease, which had first been detected in China towards the end of the previous year. There was much talk at the time about the public health and economic implications of the restrictions, which aimed to limit human contact to 'essentials'. It was clear that the lockdown would have important short-, medium- and possibly even long-term consequences for the lives and livelihoods of the community of South African historians. In recognition of this fact, on the day that the lockdown came into effect, I began emailing historian colleagues regarding their willingness to offer reflection pieces 'focusing on an aspect of the lockdown of your choice – it could be teaching, research, community engagement or any other aspect of your life as a historian' – and how it was impacted by the restrictions. As I write this abstract more than a year later, we are still in lockdown, albeit at varying 'risk-adjusted' levels, and it has long since become clear that at least some of the adjustments of the past year will become permanent. The retrospectives that follow were all completed in 2020. Though we cannot reflect with any distance from the events concerned, it may be timely to commit these *early* perspectives on the new normality to publication, in order to capture the jarring experience of the sudden transition from one world of academic practice to another.

Personal Reflections of the First Half of the 2020 Academic Year at the University of Fort Hare

Karthigasen Gopalan

The outbreak of COVID-19 has presented major challenges to the international and national communities, as political leaders scrambled to make decisions to curb the spread of the infectious disease. The closing of borders, shutting down of trade opportunities and consequent closure of many businesses has triggered a series of economic and social catastrophes that we have yet to comprehend.[1] In one respect, the shutting down of the economy and the restrictions placed on people's movements can be viewed as a direct hinderance to globalisation, but efforts to limit face-to-face interactions have also brought to the forefront the importance of technology in connecting people in different ways. For example, the proliferation of webinars and online meetings connecting people around the world, or the acceleration in implementing technology that enables people to work far from their places of employment, may have long-term implications for various sectors.

This is an interesting but also challenging time for institutions of higher learning. By moving education online, there is potential for innovation and rethinking the purpose and functioning of the university. In a country such as South Africa with severe inequality, largely the result of decades of colonialism and apartheid, such innovation is much needed, especially if there is potential to use online learning and technology to help bridge the gap that persists between universities. However, the initial phase of implementing online learning was difficult for all institutions, and particularly so, if not impossible, for those with fewer resources. Apart from the pedagogical implications of moving from face-to-face interactions to online collaborative

platforms such as MS Teams or Zoom, there were also practical considerations such as supplying resources to staff and students in order to make online teaching a possibility.

Although the transition to online teaching presented many new challenges for academics, administrators and students throughout the country, many universities were able to utilise the relevant technology to complete the first-semester syllabus. Having begun the year before the pandemic reached South Africa with regular face-to-face lectures and having started assessments, staff and students at institutions across the country were able to transition to online teaching by 4 May 2020. Using technology, online assessment strategies were implemented whether lecturers chose to use continuous assessment or substitute sit-in examinations with take-home examinations. At the time of writing, in September 2020, many institutions have completed the first semester and are currently teaching the second semester by implementing the strategies that were experimented with in the first.

The experience of the first semester at the University of Fort Hare (UFH), however, was vastly different. On the Alice Campus, only two weeks of lectures took place during the year before all academic activities were brought to an abrupt halt due to student protests, which soon spread to the East London Campus. The protests dragged on for several weeks, forcing the university to suspend academic activities. Before lectures resumed, the COVID crisis reached South Africa and forced the university to suspend academic activities once again. During the time of the national lockdown in March 2020, unable to provide internet access or laptops to students, online teaching was never really an option, and consequently UFH placed a moratorium on assessments. Several months into the year, and at the stage where other universities completed their first semester, this moratorium still stood. Only in September was the moratorium lifted.

With only two weeks of lectures and not a single assessment having taken place at a time when other universities were finalising their first semester (and some beginning the second semester), it is hardly surprising why UFH students' concerns about saving the academic year featured so prominently in the press.[2] Although internet data provisions began to be distributed in June, the first batch of laptops had yet to be delivered to students. Plans were made to begin online lectures on 3 August, but without adequate tools distributed to all students, such expectations were hardly viable.[3] To make sense of why the situation at UFH was so bleak, it is important to trace the events of 2020. This paper will take the form of a chronological narrative of events at UFH in 2020 to reveal how the university was in no position to cope with the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The University of Fort Hare in 2020

Writing about the challenges of forging a more egalitarian society or creating the rainbow nation in contemporary South Africa, Francis Nyamnojoh argues that

> Inequality in South Africa based on racial discrimination is legally a thing of the past. However, inequality is not confined to race and does not disappear simply because it has been legislated against. Attitudes and relations are important additional indicators of the extent to which South Africa has effectively transformed its institutions and practices.[4]

Such an argument makes sense when looking at the challenges of historically disadvantaged institutions or, in this instance, historically black universities, such as UFH. Given its legacy

as the first university for blacks in South Africa and the fact that its alumni include some of the most influential leaders on the African continent during the twentieth century, many expected UFH to become 'a beacon of transcending the inequalities of apartheid as an academic institution of excellence'.[5]

During the post-apartheid period, however, UFH become better known as a site of scandal and controversy. In 2019, Naledi Pandor, then minister of Higher Education and Training, announced that she had dissolved UFH's council and placed the university under the administration of Loyiso Nongxa due to 'maladministration and serious undermining of the effective functioning of the university'.[6] The independent assessors' report that followed, which was conducted by Chris Brink and Louis Molamu, found that 'dysfunction in the university's structures' dates back 'more than a decade' and that there were 'disturbing signs of a widespread belief that the university is a kind of a cash cow which everyone is entitled to milk for personal benefit'.[7] The report also stated that UFH's 'problems are systemic' and identified 'the lack of a culture of responsibility and accountability as its primary difficulty'.[8]

In responding to the situation, however, the decisions taken by management have not always been perceived by academics as the most effective way to remedy the problems that exist. As 2019 came to an end and 2020 began, there was an increasing feeling amongst some academics at UFH that governmental administration and external assessment brought about by criminal intrigues were used as a justification to enforce top-down authoritarian decisions that sidelined the organs of academic self-administration and consultative processes required for the smooth functioning of a university. Even without the COVID crisis, 2020 was expected to be a turbulent year for UFH.

The academic year at UFH began in 2020 with disruptions due to student protests. Registration was scheduled to commence during the last week of January, with lectures scheduled to begin on 4 February 2020. However, registration was halted at the East London and Alice campuses due to student protests. The protests, which saw police brought in with teargas and rubber bullets used, spilled over into the following week. In order to create time for registration to take place, lectures were postponed until 10 February. With uncertainty and disruptions during registration, when lectures did begin on Monday 10 February, only a small proportion of students attended as many were still using the week to register. Over the following week, lecture attendance increased concurrently with registration, until Monday 24 February 2020, when student protests began again on the Alice Campus, preventing lectures from continuing. On 25 February, UFH management suspended academic activities on that campus due to reports of violence.

The protests escalated quickly and began again on East London Campus, with management issuing notices of cancellation of academic activities on 27 and 28 February. Losing weeks of the academic calendar, often unaccounted for officially by management, is a normal occurrence at UFH, but acknowledgement and official cancellation of the academic programme on specific days was at least an indication that there would perhaps be some catch-up plan later to accommodate the lost days.[9] One short-term crisis averted due to the disruption in 2020 was that of finding a venue for the First and Second Year history classes, which had both far exceeded – more than twice over – the seating capacity of the lecture halls allocated to them. The intensity and violence of the protests, however, were increasing.

On 27 February, several video recordings and photographs of student confrontations with police and graphic images of student injuries were depicted on multiple news sites. In

addition, there were reports of looting of campus bookstores and damage to property, and vehicles passing on the road outside the campus were stoned, with reports of two delivery vehicles looted.[10] In response to the violence and complaints from staff whose safety was jeopardised (as they were still expected to attend physical meetings on campus), the university announced on 5 March that students were instructed to vacate their student residences. This received considerable notice in the press, especially due to the financial implications of vacating their residence and returning home. In the week to follow, with students sent home staff were nonetheless expected to report for duty; and while there was a certain sense of calm on campus, there was also anxiety about the completion of the academic programme and uncertainty about when lectures would resume. It was during this time when some of my social media contacts who lectured at other South African universities began using social media platforms to exchange ideas about online teaching platforms, as their institutions had begun encouraging distance learning. This thinking, however, did not enter the discourse at UFH, which was still centred around how to implement the controversial changes in programmes and procedures that had been dictated by management at the end of 2019.

The national state of disaster

On 15 March 2020, when the South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, declared a national state of disaster and banned public gatherings of over 100 people, UFH was just beginning to move on from the protests. Expecting the academic year to in effect begin on Monday 16 March, on that same morning university management responded with a notice that 'Lectures are suspended with immediate effect'. Immediately after, registration was extended until 20 March. It should be noted here that due to the 5 March instruction to vacate their residence, many students would not have been on campus visiting computer labs and downloading reading material. The news of the cancellation of classes would have been a deterrent for students to return to campus, given the expense of travelling. The following day, 17 March 2020, management announced that the university would go into an early recess beginning on 18 March and lasting until 15 April. At this stage, students were 'encouraged to evacuate their residence'.

One day later, on 19 March 2020, academic staff received our first instructions regarding teaching in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This pertained to uploading readings on the university's learning management system (LMS), Blackboard. The communique stated, 'a number of staff are already using Blackboard and they are encouraged to assist colleagues in their respective Departments and Faculties'. For staff who were making use of Blackboard, this seemed like an important time to make sure that adequate material was made available to students; however, being able to gauge the number of students who were on campus during this uncertain period, or had access to internet at that stage, was difficult.

By 23 March, measures were put in place to increase data to staff who at that stage had internet devices. However, many staff members had not yet been provided with internet devices and received no data. In the history department on the Alice Campus, consisting of two permanent and two time-on-task contract lectures, one of the permanent and both contract lecturers had not been provided with internet devices or data. On the same day, the president announced the 21-day national lockdown. The following day, students were given a deadline of 24 March to vacate their premises.

During the lockdown, towards the end of March, academic staff of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) received instruction that all modules needed to be on Blackboard and reading material and lecture slideshows uploaded by 1 April. However, this became a contentious issue; there were complaints from some Heads of Departments (HODs) that since staff were not provided with internet or trained in the use of Blackboard, they could not expect them to upload material. Nonetheless, even for modules that were represented on Blackboard, there was still the question of whether students were able to access them.

On 2 April, UFH announced, through their internal notices, that they would provide zero-rated access to UFH websites to assist students with access to Blackboard and the official university website. Although this was an attempt to make information available to students during the lockdown, there were still several difficulties. Students lived in areas with no or sporadic access to electricity and poor cellular network signals. A survey conducted by UFH 'found that fewer than 30% of students would be able to access online material' at this stage.[11] On 8 April, a moratorium was placed on assessments due to 'the unevenness in access to online platforms and the very real concerns about students lacking connectivity, devices and adequate work space to successfully engage in online learning'.

Perhaps one positive long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on UFH is the pressure placed on academics to familiarise themselves with and make use of Blackboard, a valuable resource not fully utilised by many. Notwithstanding the instructions to have material uploaded for students on the LMS by 1 April, towards the end of that month training sessions for staff members began. On 24 April, the SSH faculty held a training session for its staff which was hosted by the university's Teaching and Learning Centre. However, the finer features of Blackboard necessary to conduct online lectures were not covered as the bulk of the session was taken up with familiarising staff with the basics such as 'logging on'. In the week to follow, the country prepared to transition from level 5 of the national lockdown to level 4, and the minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, announced the commencement of online teaching at institutes of higher learning to begin in May.

On 4 May, staff and students received one communique stating that the 'university is putting in place the necessary protocols and equipment to enable staff to return to the university when Level 3 of national lockdown takes place'. No mention was made of online learning, and no follow-up instructions were provided about the return of staff during the remainder of my time at UFH (until 31 May). By 14 May, the SSH faculty had hosted its second Blackboard training session for staff, a repeat of the first session to accommodate those who had not attended. It was also announced that these sessions would take place weekly and eventually advance into the more complex aspects of Blackboard necessary for online teaching. Although this was a valuable service, data and internet devices had at that stage still not been issued to many staff members responsible for teaching undergraduates, and this would have influenced weekly attendance of these the online sessions.

At the time of my departure from UFH on 31 May 2020, there had still been no indication when online lectures would commence or when staff and students would be issued permits to return to campus. Students had not received data and no laptops had yet been issued.

I began working at Sol Plaatje University on 1 June, and the situation was very different. All students had been issued laptops, students and staff were provided with internet data, and live online lectures were taking place every week. However, it was clear that institutions that have not begun online teaching will be faced with a whole set of new challenges in the future.

By 23 July, UFH had begun Blackboard training sessions for students in the SSH faculty. It was only in the first week of August that UFH began issuing permits for the return of students and that distributions of laptops to first-year students were scheduled to begin. The university had purchased 12,000 laptops which it would attempt to provide to students via a loan-to-buy scheme to be debited from their fee accounts, a contentious decision that could also cause contestation in the immediate future.

Concluding remarks

COVID-19 is a global pandemic with massive implications for the functioning of institutions across the world. However, the extent to which South African universities responded successfully or unsuccessfully to the crisis is as much a reflection of South Africa's contemporary societal challenges and the internal capacities of these institutions. The pandemic not only exposes, but further contributes to, inequality as the poor are more vulnerable during such times of crisis. As UFH begins to embark on the completion of the first semester through online teaching in a rushed timeframe to complete the academic year, it will likely encounter the challenges that other institutions grappled with much earlier and have been adapting to over a longer period. An unfortunate consequence of this is the impact that it will have on the quality of education provided.

In times of crisis, such as that caused by COVID-19, universities are expected to play a key role in producing cutting edge research or seeking new perspectives from which to approach the crisis to help society move forward. When the crisis began, the responses from universities came disproportionately from the health sciences, which left the onus on other disciplines to use their unique expertise for constructive innovation.[12] In search of a vaccine and while unable to curb infections, universities will have to continue distance learning and seek ways make it work successfully. However, the extent to which distance learning works successfully during the pandemic may have implications regarding how the university functions thereafter. There may be important lessons to learn during this time that could call into question some characteristics of tertiary education that we take for granted. However, as things stand, universities such as UFH will not be active participants in this process but rather recipients of what other universities have experimented with. Although the university aims to produce independent thinkers and problem solvers, and to encourage innovation, UFH's current cohort of students were left looking on in frustration as they compared their predicament to the situation of their peers in other institutions. A situation where UFH will have to 'catch up' with what other institutions are doing could contribute to developing the image of a university not for innovation, but as a place for students who do not have the means to study elsewhere.

The Lockdown and the Methodological Dilemma of a Post-Apartheid History and Heritage Researcher

Sipokazi Madida

Introduction

I entered the second quarter of 2020 with a crowded research calendar. I had postponed my research on South African heritage institutions for almost two years. Since completing my doctorate, which involved critically examining the discursive (re)productions of heritage, I had not re-visited 'my sites' to update 'my findings'. The year 2020 offered a perfect

opportunity for me to do this. I had scanned different heritage institutions and diarised some perfect moments to visit. I had, for instance, targeted the major public events in the annual diary of Freedom Park, with certainty that this would yield some 'rich data' for my research.

I did not, however, anticipate the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent regulations, which forced me to reconsider my plans. The beginning of South Africa's lockdown on 26 March cut me off from my chosen sites, and I was suddenly faced with the dilemma of either deferring research (again) or switching to digital ethnography, which would involve following practitioners in their digital spaces and interacting with them in their 'online habitats'.[13] The moment therefore offered an opportunity for me to reconsider my reliance on physical and social proximity, and my previous lack of engagement with questions of how online environments might mediate and shape the practices and experiences that I sought to analyse.

Rethinking my ethnographic approach

Although ethnography has always been flexible and modifiable for each 'field site', and although its approaches have evolved over time, I had not kept up with the developments well enough to manage a seamless switch to digital ethnography.[14] I could not imagine 'viewing' those trimmed digital spaces, and still representing the complex, unsettled, dynamic and unpredictable 'realities' of heritage practice.

Nonetheless, the circumstances challenged me to de-limit my concept of 'viewing' and transcend the 'bias of seeing', especially one-sided see*ing*. I had to *un*-privilege the 'view' aspect of inter-view processes to enhance the 'inter' aspect, involving reciprocity and mutual benefit.[15] This is not to argue that my approach lacked the necessary reflexivity. It certainly considered positionality on both sides of the research. But the privileging of physical meetings and on-site interactions hinted at a hesitation to explore differently embodied discursive spaces. Interacting at a digital level meant that I too would be trimmed, caged and reflected on a screen, in a similar package to my research 'field'. It was unnerving.

Besides this, my approach thrived on 'live' and 'real' chaos, defaults and inadequacies, panic and contingency actions. I was accustomed to 'backstage' access and vantage-point 'views' of the strategic summoning, appropriations and deployments of pasts and presents, and the production and reproduction of connections, disconnections and reconnections.[16] From such viewpoints I had declared that post-apartheid heritage practice was far too messy to conform to such neat categories as the dominant and subordinate societal classes that the dominant ideology thesis has identified.[17] I had established firm theoretical grounds about unsettled histories and heritages. And there was I, troubled by imaginations of screen appearances void of backstage and theatrical mess.

The Freedom Park challenge

To illustrate my plight as a researcher of post-apartheid history and heritage during the COVID-19 lockdown, my research at Freedom Park may serve as an example. Freedom Park, a monumental and memorial complex near Pretoria, was due to celebrate its 20th anniversary on 1 June 2000. At the onset of lockdown, site personnel and other 'stake holders' were engrossed in preparations for the big day. I had initially planned to visit the park twice a week in April and May, to critically observe and document the preparation and planning, especially

the activities of Freedom Park's Public Participation and Heritage and Knowledge departments.

I anticipated that the history commemorated at the site was about to be invoked and re-interpreted, both rhetorically and performatively, in ways that would be grafted into the site's major features, creating compelling connections of past and present. South Africans were about to be rendered a nation once again, and be declared ancient, current and eternal. I anticipated how all such connections and disconnections would be construed, as well as the discursive practices that would unfold at the park prior to and during the event.

I was about to observe the planning processes – including 'stake holder' consultations, plenaries, caucuses and meetings – and engage with the drafts and final concepts, briefings and programmes. I was also going to interact with and engage those involved regarding their decisions and actions. I had previously argued that the Freedom Park developed through a series of conceptually comprehended phases, marked with temporal successes, miscalculations, revisions and adjustments.[18] I had ignored the aspect of rigid hegemonic control of representations of the past, which was evident to some extent. I had instead focused on the park's dynamism, and temporal and transitory moments of failures and achievements.

Through my analysis of the Freedom Park's backstage deliberations and public pageantry, I concluded that none of the concepts, frameworks, designs, aesthetics, representations or symbolism it construed had lasting meanings. In my research at Freedom Park I had avoided face-to-face interviews as much as possible. The observation approach accorded me the choice of embodying a harmless visitor or a disengaged stranger, whom staff passed by without noticing or acknowledging. There was a downside, though, when I finally chose to interact and ask individuals about their engagements: many gave me little attention and brief answers. Very few engaged me back, yet I was content with the extent of my reflexivity.

As stated above, the lockdown disorientated my compass and caused me to hesitate about my research trajectory. Nonetheless, it was with trepidation that I contacted the Freedom Park information desk to enquire about the new nature of operations, although it was already obvious that the park embodied by the practitioners would for a while hibernate in virtual space.

Like many cultural institutions across the globe, Freedom Park went ahead with many of its internal and public events planned for the lockdown period. The 20-year celebrations were livestreamed on the Freedom Park's websites, on Facebook, and on YouTube. I was in virtual attendance, although I had lost touch with proceedings behind the screen, especially the adjustments necessitated by the lockdown and the processes through which a limited cohort of speakers and storytelling performers appeared in seamless order. The 'show' was in its entirety a subject of ethnographic note, especially the speeches and the oddities of being 'welcomed' to a virtual Freedom Park, and introduced to invisible dignitaries.[19] The different embodiments of the COVID-19 circumstances by the speakers and storytellers were curious too. Some appeared with face masks lowered to their chins, while the elderly former Freedom Park Chief Executive Officer, Professor Mondlane Serote, appeared with protective hand gloves and face mask, which he kept tightly on for the duration of his speech.

Ultimately, the moment was unfulfilling – perhaps because of my inability to observe the process of the production of the event. While I slightly regretted the absent backstage

opportunity, I had a semi-satisfactory feeling that the virtual planning sessions and meetings would have been as unfulfilling to witness as the event itself.

Besides, with restricted access to the institutional intranet I could not conduct virtual participation observations, or unobtrusively lurk behind screens and observe practitioners' online activities and interactions. At the same time, I avoided conducting the so-called synchronous virtual interviews that involve online chats, and the asynchronous virtual interviews that involve emails. I had grown weary of self-representations and self-narrations, and their tendency to gloss over inadequacies, inconsistencies, operational glitches, and unintended consequences. As discussed above, I was more interested in the actions and counter-actions producing heritage, and in comparing rhetoric with actions and products.

The dilemma

Qualitative research methodologies are undoubtedly most beneficial for social sciences such as history and heritage studies, as they facilitate deep understandings of actions, processes, behaviours, perspectives, feelings and experiences. One such methodology is ethnography, which is rooted in the philosophical traditions and foundations of disciplines like anthropology and sociology. While many historians embrace ethnography as a method of connecting past, present and future, some tend to reflect unease over its methods, especially when the element of change over time seems missing or difficult to underscore. Many studies have explored this phenomenon, but for the scope of this piece it should suffice to simply locate my dilemma within this nervousness.[20]

Having embraced the dilemma as a constructive challenge and an opportunity to adapt my approaches, I turned to the digital worlds of other researchers for inspiration. I found diverse traverses of virtual and digital spaces that utilised different approaches such as ethnography of virtual worlds, digital ethnography, virtual ethnography and netnography.[21] For example, Brian Campbell, an anthropology lecturer at the University of Plymouth, blogged with his students about 'Coping with Corona: Pushing Ethnographic Fieldwork in Times of Pandemic'. They shared their various approaches in studying religious groups, activism, home environments, and employees in supermarkets and others on zero-hour contracts.[22] Dean Allen, a historian popularly known as 'the man who brings history to life', was another researcher unfazed by lockdowns. He had a massive collection of recorded interviews and talks on different subjects, which he utilised to run a series of webinars that simultaneously engaged audiences across the globe.[23]

In the virtual spaces of cultural institutions, enthusiasts like Dan Hicks (an archaeology professor at Oxford University, and curator of World Archaeology at Pitt Rivers Museum), ran '#MuseumsUnlocked', a lockdown project on twitter, that spanned from 1 April to 9 July 2020. It invited the *twitterati* to curate images on the twitter page based on daily themes.[24] Similarly, architect Paul Mikula (who restored the Roberts House in Glenwood, KwaZulu-Natal, and turned it into Phansi Museum) hosted a series of Zoom webinar lectures on 'Nguni History, Art, Stories and Culture' between June and July 2020.[25] Another inspiring venture was the online platform that United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) launched on 7 May 2020. It was for heritage communities across the world to curate online spaces and share the impact of COVID-19 on their living heritages, and for them to discuss the ways in which they combated the challenges.[26]

Certainly, many worlds had shut down, but there remained a number of opportunities at the researchers' disposal, permitting them to stretch, adjust and adapt their approaches. Digital spaces, although seemingly peculiar, could be boldly confronted beyond the façade of uniformity and efficiency. They too embodied randomness and disturbances, and their backstages could, with more precision, be fathomed amid what seemed like trimmed and tidy screens. Ultimately, it was refreshing to think of digital heritage spaces and the operations taking place on screens and at a social distance as new theatres of knowledge.

Academic *Kintsugi* – Fragments from the Front in a Plague Year

Sandra Swart

Awaking on Friday morning, 27 March 2020, South African citizens found themselves not actually captive, but strangers in the land of their birth.[27] Indeed, strangers in our own worlds. We wrote these essays during unprecedented times. The human world watched the victorious progression of a virus – coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) – which had its first reported incursions on New Year's Eve following an odd cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, China. As we write, seven months later, COVID-19 has become a global pandemic and it continues to spread rapidly around the world. The first drafts were written while we were not actually captive, but under lockdown by the state to try to contain the first advances of the virus in our own country. This was designed to 'flatten the curve' of infection – to slow the rate of contagion to ensure a more-prepared, less-overburdened health care system, and so that the vulnerable would not all be exposed at the same time and repeatedly to the virus. Day One of lockdown saw a thousand already infected and the first COVID-19-related death in South Africa.

The virus means different things for different people – it affects the old and immune-compromised more harshly. In the same way, the lockdown meant different things to different people – for some it was merely a temporary suspension of work and pleasure; for others it was the real possibility of bankruptcy or even starvation. The lockdown's effects were compounded by the economics of catastrophe: South Africa's massive gulf between rich and poor was thrown into stark relief. Then, on the first day of lockdown, the rating agency Moody's cut South Africa's credit rating to junk status. While some other countries on lockdown rely on the existing social contract to self-police, South Africa hastily passed draconian legislation (anyone breaking the rules faces six months in gaol or a fine, or both). The South African Defence Force called up reserves in advance of declaring this state of emergency. The army and police patrolled the streets again – eerily reminiscent of Apartheid's dying days – but this time they were deployed against an enemy that is invisible and unkillable. Ad hoc violence from armed law enforcement included the murder of civilians who disrespected them. While people were vocal, the world outside was suddenly quiet. City streets were empty. The white noise of modern living – schools, traffic, trains, sirens, dogs, people passing in the street – suddenly stilled. We could hear birds and each other. We discovered new soundscapes, but each of us was abruptly highly localised, unable to experience any others. Supermarkets were open for a limited range of goods, with mandatory distancing, compulsory masking and sanitation stations. There was the ever-present fear – or reality – of extreme vulnerability: connection with others could mean disease or death. The earth was suddenly alien to us. (*It's life, Jim, but not as we know it*).

Over the years, I have noticed that my students often feel chastened by the fact that history – 'real history' – happens elsewhere, to other people, at other times. But suddenly they had a

sense that they were living in it. Despite the sheer horror, there was a frisson of intellectual excitement. They were keenly aware of the historical moment, so I asked them to keep 'lockdown diaries' (in the form of journals, movies, artworks, poems or songs) – and they experienced 'producing primary documents'. They spoke with new energy, making historical connections: to the plague they had studied in my first-year course ('A Brief History of the Last Five Million Years'), to the strong-arm tactics of states and abuse by law enforcement they had studied in my third-year course (on the Civil Rights era).

Unlike colleagues at other universities, I cannot complain of infrastructural difficulties. Stellenbosch University is both efficient and (relatively) well resourced. We swiftly suspended face-to-face lecturing, moving – almost seamlessly – to our online platform. The university's top suits – the rectorate – ruefully quoted Lenin: 'There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen'. They wryly conceded that they were not perhaps Mr Lenin's *greatest* fans, but operationally they concurred with the fellow.

The lecturing staff rose to the occasion. Like most academics, we are enduringly bad with petty problems and oddly good at large ones. We learned fast. We made it work. We figured out Zoom and Teams. We made Nollywood-style podcasts on our phones (mine were podcasts on the 1960s, interspersed with Hendrix and Dylan tracks). Improvisation stretched us and, refreshingly, low-technology options proved preferable, because of the challenges of the digital divide. Our university secured 1700 loan laptops for those who needed them; we made a deal with cellular networks for zero-rated access to our online learning platforms and provided all students with data bundles. Small innovations inspired us: colleagues printed three-dimensional ventilator components and protective equipment for medical staff and – in a weird kind of updated modern parable – one colleague even turned bread into alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

Recognising the increased need in these unsettling times, counselling services continued online, and students with disabilities received the necessary computer equipment, with the university seeking external funding to provide it. Nothing is for free – so austerity measures were enforced in other sectors of our university. But it was worth it.

The university spoke a lot about the importance of *connectivity*. But it was clear that what mattered just as much was *connection*. Many students and faculty spoke of loneliness. A first year's lockdown diary reported missing the social experience of student life, finding: 'COVID has made my life feel simultaneously stagnant and turbulent'. Another added: 'it was difficult to cope with the new norm of […] being at home, as my small little bit of freedom was going to university, and that was lost […] I never kept a diary but I cut all my hair off as a memory … '. A doctoral student described the situation with ironic humour:

> lockdown showed that working from home was a myth – not needing to wake up early, take a bath and have breakfast while rushing against time has a psychological impact on how much time you *think* you have extra during the day. (Mental calculations will say let me use those bathing minutes and get extra sleep!) With time though, working from home becomes easy, the challenge becomes, home is where the heart is and your heart is at the [History Department] seeing familiar faces.

Well, we maintained (imperfect) online connection in my postgraduate research group and we experimented with new forms of communication – much was ad hoc and improvisational.

This didactic spontaneity – at best 'intellectual stand-up' and at worst academic autoschediasm – is liberating. This year my students (post- and undergraduates) often spoke – on Zoom – about an important principle for coping with the last seven months, that *The perfect is the enemy of the good.* So, by corollary, *A good thesis today is better than a perfect thesis someday. A day that starts at noon and is lived in your pyjamas is not necessarily wasted. A year lived online does not have to be lost. Imperfect connection is better than loneliness.* This principle means accepting flaws, breaks, scars and ruptures. In a world of air-brushed Instagram or – its academic equivalent – university corporate spin, it is important to talk about failures, defeats, lessons learned the hard way. Many of the students became intrigued by the metaphor of *Kintsugi*, the Japanese practice of repairing fragmented pottery as an art form. The glue used to piece the shattered fragments back together contains liquid gold, silver or lacquer dusted with powdered gold. Every break line is history, after all. So instead of repairing an item to try to make it appear 'new', the ancient technique embraces 'scars' as key to embracing history, imperfect lives and evidence of resilience. *Sometimes in repairing things that have fragmented, we actually create something different.* My students considered this a good way to think about surviving 2020. They said: we can cope with crises, with traumatic events, and with physical and mental ruptures with philosophical *kintsugi*.

Another doctoral student remarked: 'Lockdown brought to a halt my physical interactions with colleagues and working without such interaction proved difficult, slowed down progress and congested the mind'.[28] I found it interesting that a lack of human connection had a clogging effect, because we always used to crave the elusive holy grail of people-free time in which to write. What if it was an illusion and we need connection to be creative?

Cronon and corona

Thinking about what my students said, I was forcibly reminded of the E.M. Forster line 'Only connect! … Live in fragments no longer', which inspired an essay two decades ago by Bill Cronon, a US environmental historian, in which he pondered what higher education was supposed to do. He argued: '[B]eing an educated person means being able to see *connections* that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways'.[29] Understanding needs connection. But teaching needs connection too. It really hit home to me how much my lectures depend on my students, how much lecture theatre energy comes from the students themselves. I am a much better teacher in real life to real, breathing humans. We probably *all* are. We subconsciously watch the micro-body language of our students – we can read when they get it and when they do not, when they need more, when they need less, when they need a break, and when they need to be pushed. Presence matters; *human connection matters.*

Look, despite all the peppy boosterism and upbeat rhetoric about 'now realising how easy it is to teach online! How online instruction is clearly the future', what I really learned was the opposite: the simple but profound importance of presence and real connection. These strange times make it tough. We have to figure out ways to put the fragments back together – even if does not look the same once we glue it back. *Sometimes in repairing things that have fragmented, we actually create something different.*

I thought a lot about other opportunities for connections in the loneliness of lockdown. Freud was right: we need to work and we need to love. Working from home, I had new colleagues, some of whom slept under my desk, some of whom barked during a senate meeting and some of whom tended to fart very loudly on Zoom calls. During lockdown, two of them died: the

little Jack Russell Kyle, still a debonair ladies' man at almost 17 years old, and my beloved Mojo, the gentle and melancholy ridgeback, who helped many students at Stellenbosch University as a therapy dog (she died – fittingly – of an enlarged heart).

I am left with her daughter, the high-maintenance heartbreaker Rio. (She would be a very good second reviewer). But quite aside from canine colleagues, I have been rethinking the meaning of the traditional 'department'. In the past, we have conventionally thought of ourselves contained in the one fundamental 'envelope' of our department. It was containing but also constraining. The colleagues in your corridor faced an impossible task: they were supposed to share their research, critique your work, help educate your postgraduates, provide stimulating seminars and be interested in the details of your sub-discipline – all deeply unfair to expect of our small, understaffed academic departments. The COVID world has exposed this as fundamentally unnecessary. I do not mean that interdisciplinarity is king and that disciplinary units are obsolete – not at all! I do not espouse the notion, bruited about by Mark Taylor and others, of abolishing permanent departments (he suggests establishing problem-focused units, which are evaluated every seven years and then either closed, continued or changed).[30] In fact, I think interdisciplinary projects only work if collaborators are well trained and strongly rooted in their own disciplines. Effective interdisciplinarity actually depends on the existence of robust disciplines. So, contending that academic departments are passé is a mistake. After all, departments teach the fundamental methodologies and techniques as well as the core body of knowledge in which our research is grounded. Interdisciplinarity cannot exist without disciplines, and disciplines cannot exist without departments.

What I propose is constructing virtual and shifting departments while remaining within our discipline. They are 'departments' built up – by yourself – with your own network of colleagues you choose, internationally. These are the people who will read your work, be your academic allies , push you, critique you, and be your comrades at the frontier of your discipline. The new online teaching world has shown how easy it is to connect: you can talk, hold seminars and co-supervise one another's students. Conferences can be online or they can be hybrids of face-to-face and virtual (thus simultaneously being more inclusive). Previously local 'departmental seminars' are suddenly available worldwide. Collaborative projects have never seemed easier. Ironically, locking down and self-isolating opened up new possibilities for connection. Of course, ideally, virtual connectivity should establish a foundation that allows subsequent real-life connection too – real-life academic exchanges are key in this. Moreover, of course your own material department is still significant – but it is primarily focused on the shared project of undergraduate teaching, which only occupies about a third of one's time (depending on the university). It is radical and liberating thought – that you build your own 'department' – or perhaps it is more accurate to say that you occupy many 'departments' simultaneously, some of which you construct yourself. This kind of 'connectivity by choice' restores agency to academics.

So, by 'virtual departments', I mean a radically increased degree of collaboration between individuals *across* institutions. Technology has long had the potential for individuals (or departments) to form partnerships to share expertise – to share students and faculty. The probability was there: we just needed to experience the possibility. *Sometimes in repairing things that have fragmented, we actually create something different.*

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Notes

1 This is not to ignore the ways in which the pandemic may have undermined government programmes designed to address inequality, both nationally and globally. The speed and urgency with which government had to respond to the crisis could result in long-term policies that are counterproductive to these aims, and progress made by international programmes such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals could be undermined as poorer countries become increasingly vulnerable to the debt crisis, which will be exacerbated by the pandemic. See Y. Sayed and M. Singh, 'Evidence and Education Policy Making in South Africa during COVID-19: Promises, Researchers and Policymakers in an Age of Unpredictability', *South African Review of Education: Emergent Educational Imaginaries During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 26, 1 (2020), 20–39.

2 See for example M. Moulton, 'University of Fort Hare Students Call to #SaveUFHAcademicYear' (Blue Sky Publications), https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/university-of-fort-hare-students-call-to-saveufhacademicyear/, accessed 6 August 2020; B. Macupe, 'Students "Dreams Are Crumbling"', *Mail and Guardian*, 25 July 2020; and S. Segar, 'Already on the Back Foot, Can Fort Hare Save Its Academic Year?', *University World News African Edition* (7 May 2020), https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200506123543639, accessed 6 August 2020.

3 This is not withstanding the efforts made by some lecturers to upload videos of their lectures on Blackboard and make use of chatrooms and WhatsApp groups to provide interaction.

4 F.B. Nyamnjoh, 'South Africa: Hopeful and Fearful', in U. Pillay, G. Hagg and F. Nyamnjoh with J. Jansen, eds, *State of the Nation: South Africa 2012–2013: Addressing Inequality and Poverty* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2013), 305.

5 C. Brink and L. Molamu, *Report of the Independent Assessor Regarding the University of Fort Hare (UFH)* (Department of Higher Education and Training, Pretoria, 13 December 2019), 25.

6 Department of Higher Education And Training, *Appointment of an Administrator for the University of Fort Hare* (29 April 2019) https://local.greengazette.co.za/notices/higher-education-act-101-1997-as-amended-appointment-of-an-administrator-for-the-university-of-fort-hare_20190429-GGN-42425-00618.pdf, accessed 7 August 2020.

7 Brink and Molamu, *Report of the Independent Assessor*, p. 36.

8 L. Sidimba, 'Investigation Clears Embattled Fort Hare Vice-Chancellor's Name' (19 December 2019), https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/investigation-clears-embattled-fort-hare-vice-chancellors-name-39469289, accessed 7 August 2020.

9 In the first semester of 2019 for example, over six weeks were lost due to student protests. There was never a single acknowledgement of this fact from management, and no catch-up plan was implemented to make up for the six weeks of the academic calendar that was lost.

10 S. Majangaza, 'Fort Hare Students Start to Block Traffic, Loot Cars as Protest Continues', *Daily Dispatch* (27 February 2020), https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/2017-09-27-fort-hare-students-start-to-block-traffic-loot-cars-as-protest-continues/, accessed 10 August 2020.

11 Segar, 'Already on the Back Foot'.

12 Health sciences have played a crucial role in enhancing our understanding of the virus and its effects on people, and experts in that field have consequently played an important role in guiding policymakers. However, a case could be made that 'the linkage between science, evidence and policy making in general' is not purely the domain of sciences and experts in other fields may have valuable contributions, Sayed and Singh, 'Evidence and Education Policy Making', 24.

13 R.E. Hallett and K. Barber, 'Ethnographic Research in a Cyber Era', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 43, 3 (2014), 306–330.

14 T. Boellstorff, B. Nardi, C. Pearce and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 4. For an overview of how ethnography has evolved over time (from simplifying and exotifying cultures and experiences, to accepting complexity), see R.P. Clair, 'The Changing Story of Ethnography', in R.P. Clair, ed, *Expressions of Ethnography: Novel Approaches to Qualitative Methods* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 3–26.

15 R.P. Clair, 'Prologue: Introduction', in R.P. Clair, ed, *Expressions of Ethnography: Novel Approaches to Qualitative Methods* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), xi–xiii.

16 E. Waterton, E. Watson, S. Silverman and H. Silverman, 'An Introduction to Heritage in Action', in H. Silverman, E. Waterton and S. Watson, eds, *Heritage in Action: Making the Past in the Present* (Springer, 2017), 3–16.

17 N. Abercrombie, S. Hill and B.S. Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980).

18 S. Sambumbu, 'Making Heritage in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Agencies, Museums and Sites' (PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, 2017), 190–223.

19 Indeed, the dignitaries acknowledged at the beginning of the programme, such as Former President Thabo Mbeki and Sports, Arts and Culture Minister Nathi Mthethwa, later appeared in succession to address the audience.

20 For example, M. Rowlinson, J. Hassard and S. Decker, 'Research Strategies for Organizational History: A Dialogue between Historical Theory and Organization Theory', *Academy of Management Review* (2014), https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2012.0203, accessed 23 July 2020; E. Dench, 'Ethnography and History', in J. Marincola, ed, *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*, Volume 1 (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 493–503.

21 In summary, the three approaches differ in that virtual ethnography studies people in their virtual spaces; digital ethnography uses digital tools to conduct ethnographic studies; and netnography involves non-participant observation of online communities. See A. Caliandro, 'Ethnography in Digital Spaces: Ethnography of Virtual Worlds, Netnography, and Digital Ethnography', in P. Sunderland and R. Denny, eds, *Handbook of Business Anthropology* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014), 738–761.

22 https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/ba-anthropology/coping-with-corona-pushing-ethnographic-fieldwork-in-times-of-pandemic, accessed 26 July 2020.

23 For example, http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/notice/historian-dr-dean-allen-conversation-class-1995, accessed 18 June 2020.

24 https://twitter.com/museumsunlocked?lang=en, accessed 23 June 2020.

25 For example, http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/notice/phansi-museum-webinar-lectures-paul-mikula, accessed 23 June 2020.

26 https://ich.unesco.org/en/news/living-heritage-experiences-in-the-context-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-13261, accessed 6 June 2020.

27 These lines were written in homage to a great historian, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, who captured the experience of sudden defamiliarisation and alienation like no other. See S.T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa, Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion* (London: P.S. Kings and Sons, 1916, 11). Like his, mine 'is but a sincere narrative of a melancholy situation […] under a very strange law, so as most readily to be understood by the sympathetic reader'. Unlike his, mine describes a law of nature.

28 My thanks to my students Anakin Curtis, Ayrton Melton, Bryan Umaru Kauma and Tinashe Takuva.

29 William Cronon, '"Only Connect … " – The Goals of a Liberal Education', The American Scholar, 67, 4 (1998), 73–80.

30 Mark Taylor, *Crisis on Campus – A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* (New York: Knopf, 2010).