

# Occupational Hazards<sup>1</sup>

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## Prologue: Double binds

In the broadest terms, the modern university's purposes are inherently contradictory, because the institution serves as a means of both reproduction and revolution.

- Reproduction: the university is charged with maintaining and reproducing the fundamental competencies required for the polity to reproduce itself.
- Revolution: at the same time, the university is at the centre of movements for social transformation and politico-intellectual renewal.

The expectation then is that the university – as a site of contradictions – can somehow hold together the profoundly agonistic and antagonistic purposes of repetition and of rupture. This begins to suggest something of the complexity of what the university does. It secures futures of employment; it prepares the society for the control of disease; it provides mobility; it also troubles us with philosophy, challenges us with science.

Those two broad and seemingly contrary imperatives (reproduction or revolution) suggest an inherent tension at the core of the university, although of course the obligation on the university is to accomplish both of these tasks.<sup>2</sup> The recent complexities arising from environmental crises as well as political turbulence suggest that the university necessarily will have to prepare itself to anticipate change (itself an ambiguous task) while securing the principles and values upon which it is founded.

The title of my paper, 'Occupational Hazards', tries to capture something of the complexity. I have in mind here the 'occupation', which is a particular ambition of segments of the university: to equip persons (and their sensibilities and understanding) to adapt them for professional lives, as productive and competent instruments through which society is maintained. At the same time, I want to think of 'Occupy'

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1 Editors' comment: This piece, as with some others included in this Special Issue, retains traces of having been a lecture. We have not sought to eradicate these traces.

2 The formulation of the 'double bind' is indebted to Gregory Bateson's conception. In the 1950s Bateson and his colleagues used the term to characterise the contradictory signals often communicated in the parent-child relation. For Bateson, this was a key determinant in the precipitation of schizophrenia, with the child unable to resolve the conflicting meanings being communicated either verbally or physically by the parent. See G. Bateson, D.D. Jackson, J. Haley and J. Weakland, 'Towards a Theory of Schizophrenia', *Behavioral Science*, 1(4) (1956), 251–264. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak engaged with the principle in her study *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). This is the site of an ethics, and the choice does not result in the experience of certainty, but rather, of 'regret', which suggests a persistent irresolution.

as an activity and as a political movement, a revolutionary imperative to demonstrate the everyday in some particular context unsustainable through disruption and resistance.

Is there a way of thinking about that tension arising from the university's seemingly contrary imperatives as productive rather than disabling for the university in contemporary South Africa? I will, because of my habit and my intellectual obligation, be thinking about this question at the point of intersection of the university with the arts.

## The Bologna Process

Let me open by considering the so-called Bologna Process, because of Bologna's relation to the origins of the university. The name itself provides a kind of warranty of value to the process of renewal, as Bologna University is the oldest surviving 'university' in the commonly understood meaning of the term (a degree-awarding institute of higher learning). Bologna is thus associated with antique traditions of scholarship as well as intellectual continuity. At the end of the twentieth century, the Bologna Process was put in place in order to establish protocols to bring a 'rationalism' and 'uniformity' to the higher education sector in Europe and the UK, ostensibly to ensure the survival of the university. The descriptor, the 'Bologna Process', may suggest some ambivalence about an endeavour to adapt tertiary education to the moment of substantial world-historical capitalisation, and the name can function to ground the new university and its procedures within the intellectual terrain of the archaic, to signal (if you will) a continuity of purpose rather than a rupture.

In a recent interview on aesthetic education, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak invokes Kant's definition of the aesthetic as 'purposive without purpose': this, surely, for Spivak, is its value.<sup>3</sup> It is a mode of apprehension that is profoundly contradictory, as there cannot be 'defined' ends or purposes, even while its purposiveness is not in doubt.

The Bologna Process produced many complex and often thoughtful documents aiming to articulate what, specifically, the university's purpose is and might become. Yet aspects of the dominant logic are not so nuanced. There is a clear indication that the Bologna Process sought to ensure that education and training systems address the needs of a changing labour market:

their meeting in Bergen in 2005 defines the qualifications in terms of learning outcomes: statements of what students know and can do on completing their degrees. In describing the cycles, the framework uses the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System.<sup>4</sup>

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3 See <https://politicsandculture.org/2012/09/25/> (accessed 20 September 2017).

4 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bologna\\_Process](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bologna_Process) (accessed 4 October 2017).

The above Wikipedia entry is in part a characterisation, some might even say a caricature, of what Bologna sought to capture, but these are the terms that have been activated as useful for the neoliberal phase of the university. It is the market that drives and defines the character and orientation of the universities. While one grasps the desire for imagining how the university might enable humane levels of employment, this understates the university's potential role in educating graduates who will be able to challenge and redefine employment regimes, rather than simply meet the needs of a changing labour market. At present that labour market is a radically globalised one, and the conditions of employment are profoundly uneven. Moreover, the Europe 2020 strategy for Bologna intended to 'put knowledge at the heart of the Union's efforts for achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth'.<sup>5</sup>

Geoffrey Boulton draws critical attention to the commonplace opinion that universities should embrace 'the chance to play a central role as dynamos of growth in the innovation process and be huge generators of wealth creation'.<sup>6</sup> Boulton critiques the increasingly normative state ambition

to create a research university that performs powerfully, just like MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], and which primarily contributes to a competitive economy. This both misunderstands the role of MIT and, like all obsessions, such a single-minded focus on what universities ought to be has lots of dangers, one of which is that it undermines the fundamental primary purpose, which is the engine of all the secondary benefits of a university. If this dies, all of the secondary benefits go with it.<sup>7</sup>

Boulton's analysis implicitly makes evident a clustering of state interests, universities, research, copyright and ownership, and points to a desired complexity with his reference to MIT. Nonetheless, there are some ironies in his linking of MIT with economic competitiveness because in 1972 a group of scholars at that same institution produced a commissioned report, *The Limits to Growth*, which described the potential dangers in the unrestrained growth at the rate then being experienced globally.<sup>8</sup> The year before, a Romanian-born economist, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, had published *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, a work which, based on the second law of thermodynamics, asserted that economic growth gave rise to an increase in entropy.<sup>9</sup>

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5 See <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52011DC0567> (accessed 4 October 2017).

6 Geoffrey Boulton, 'GLOBAL: What Are Universities for?' *University World News*, 29 March 2009, <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20090326200944986> (accessed 1 October 2017).

7 See University of Amsterdam, 'The Purpose of Universities: An Interview with Professor Geoffrey Boulton', 20 August 2015, <http://www.uva.nl/en/content/news/news/2015/08/the-purpose-of-universities-an-interview-with-professor-geoffrey-boulton.html> (accessed 1 October 2017).

8 Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers and William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

9 Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971[2014]). The author's reconsideration of the paper can be found in 'The Entropy Law and the Economic Process in Retrospect', *Eastern Economic Journal*, 12(1) (Jan–March 1986), 3–25. Here he considers his assertion that 'the economic process is entropic in all its material fibres' (p. 3).

Whereas the liberal arts have always been a cornerstone of traditional university education, many humanities disciplines have of late been cut back. For example, such language programmes as are not deemed 'strategic' languages have been significantly undermined. Of course the past two decades have demonstrated just how short-sighted such a policy is, as it is impossible to know in any fixed way which regions of the globe will become strategic.

It would seem that for many policy-makers and administrators, the humanities have little relevance in the twenty-first century. An egregious error, says Boulton:

The idea that there is a direct and simple line between research products and GDP is based on a thoroughly erroneous analysis. If you believe this, then the next assumption is that subject areas like the natural sciences, engineering and medicine are the means by which such GDP increments will be achieved. It's wrong. It's mistaken. It simply isn't true.<sup>10</sup>

A more pernicious effect of such reasoning, Boulton argues, is that young adults are persuaded to believe that it is more important to study science and medicine because these are the supposed backbone of the economy and will increase their prospects of employment.

In doing so, we ignore the total gamut of human activity, emotion, understanding and learning, and instead push our students into a very narrow range of disciplines – a range in which many are going to be failures. Human talents are more diverse. To say therefore that there is only one form of human understanding that matters, and that anyone who doesn't subscribe to it is somehow a failure, is a perversion.<sup>11</sup>

Boulton is advocating the humanities but there is an economic argument underlying his defence: ultimately, he argues that it is not true that the humanities cannot be real income generators like the sciences, engineering and medicine. This is to rely once again on an economic logic.

The cluster 'science, engineering and medicine', which defines, relationally, a new model of the biomedical sciences, has in the past several decades constituted a nexus that aligns distinct technologies and protocols that reorient the biopolitics of modernity. 'Intensive care' has displaced 'care' as a priority, and biomedical research spans pharmaceutical interventions, transplant and prosthetics, to ward off the old enemy Death, while in the process a perhaps more fearsome enemy even than death has emerged: Old Age. It is not the purpose of this paper to examine how this complex of ideas is fuelling the emerging economic engine of many research universities; rather, it signals a shift in orientation and the extension of the 'clientage' logic of research across an increasing range of fields.

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<sup>10</sup> University of Amsterdam, 'The Purpose of Universities.'

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

## The logic of extraction

It is as well to interrogate the conception of 'growth' that underlies the descriptions of the demands to be met by the university of the future (as conceived by Bologna). The orientation of global capital in the past several months has consolidated and entrenched particular modes of extraction inside a regime of heightening servitude and tyranny.

Over the previous decade, the deregulation of monopolistic financial interests precipitated a staggering escalation of asymmetries between the accumulation of wealth and a simultaneous deepening and broadening of wretched poverty. This is, it seems, the structural form (or deformation) of what has come somewhat misleadingly to be referred to as 'growth'. The hallmarks of 'growth' of the past several decades are an apparent coupling of capital accumulation with dispossession. Many who now are classified as 'employed' are working piecemeal on 'zero-hour contracts', working for an hourly wage with no predefined monthly income, because the situations have no fixed hours of employment. There are of course no benefits, nor job security in such situations, where people are somewhere between underemployed and unemployed though demographically they are classified as 'employed' in the massaging of government statistics.

In such terms, 'growth' is something of a misnomer; representations about a slow-down in the economy are as much engineered and discursive as 'Real', and are used to amplify the taken-for-granted goods of 'growth', now used to justify the capitalising priorities of the universities. I want to challenge that 'taken as given' idea of growth as a necessary good.

The principle underpinning the degrowth movement holds that the costs of the perpetual pursuit of 'growth' ultimately exceed any notional economic gain because of the hidden costs from environmental impact, climate change and concomitant health dilemmas. (This is not the first time that the principle of restraint has been articulated. Across the nineteenth century, intellectuals as diverse as Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi and William Morris advocated a mode of self-limiting consumption.) And here I am not advocating a shrinking of the economy as South Africa emerges from apartheid: this is one of the contradictions implicit in the complex gambit of imagining the strategic interests as well as the ethical hopes of the university. Somehow the university must straddle a complex imagination that can hold growth and degrowth as navigated contraries. I am urging attentiveness to the question of growth as an ambiguous idea as we think about economy, resources, wealth. The costs of development must be part of our reckoning.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in Thesis One of his paper 'The Climate of History', argues that 'anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history'. Here is his terse assessment:

as the crisis gathered momentum in the last few years, I realized that all my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern

studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today...The scientific consensus around the proposition that the present crisis of climate change is man-made forms the basis of what I have to say here.<sup>12</sup>

Achille Mbembe more recently extends the argument in his 'Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive'. He posits the question: 'Is today's university the same as yesterday's or are we confronting an entirely different *apparatus*, an entirely different rationality – both of which require us to produce radically new concepts?'<sup>13</sup> Mbembe, following Chakrabarty, calls for a collapse of the distinction between natural history and human history. He asserts:

A Eurocentric canon is a canon that attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production. It is a canon that disregards other epistemic traditions. It is a canon that tries to portray colonialism as a normal form of social relations between human beings rather than a system of exploitation and oppression. Furthermore, Western epistemic traditions are traditions that claim detachment of the known from the knower. They rest on a division between mind and world, or between reason and nature as an ontological *a priori*. They are traditions in which the knowing subject is enclosed in itself and peeks out at a world of objects and produces supposedly objective knowledge of those objects. The knowing subject is thus able, we are told, to know the world without being part of that world and he or she is by all accounts able to produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context...We therefore have to *rethink the human not from the perspective of its mastery of the Creation as we used to, but from the perspective of its finitude and its possible extinction*.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of 'extinction' invoked here has a substantial history that articulates, in the west, with radical challenges to education and knowledge systems, and in many ways revolutionised the world. In the eighteenth century extinction was a new idea, triggered in part by the unearthing of several fossils of extinct mammoths. Georges Cuvier, a naturalist who joined the National Museum in Paris shortly after the French Revolution, gave substance to an outlandish idea that had been posited by his predecessor, Buffon. The discovery gave rise to the question: what can it possibly mean if there were once species that no longer exist? This was one of the great ruptures that

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12 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (Winter 2009), 201, 199, 201.

13 Achille Mbembe, 'Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive', p. 8 (emphasis in original). This paper was given in 2015 as a spoken text in a series of public lectures at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research. See <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf> (accessed 1 October 2017).

14 *Ibid.*, 9, 25 (emphasis in original).

precipitated a crisis for theological thought and gave rise to a conception of geological time, which in turn made evolutionary theory thinkable. Perhaps we are at another such threshold. Our imagination cannot bear to contemplate extinction because we cannot think of our own species annihilation; nor, it seems, can we constrain our behaviours in ways that are relevant to our survival. The idea of extinction for Buffon provided an impetus of profound enough significance to transform conceptions of time, and of the human place in the natural world. Can the idea of extinction precipitate such a revolution in the university now?

Amitav Ghosh recently provoked us to think of ‘the great derangement’: our capacity to live as if we have no foreknowledge of imminent catastrophe.<sup>15</sup> If, as it is becoming increasingly critical to acknowledge, our modernity, and indeed our postmodernity, are expressions of the negative aspects of the complex achievements arising from scholarly enquiry based in the western and/or western-styled university and its enlightenment, perhaps it is necessary to engage in a reconsideration of what might be the obligation and the opportunity of the postcolonial university.

In other words, we must embrace the understanding that many of the brilliant gains of the western university have had a direct negative impact on planetary and species well-being. Our planet is in a profound way defined and delimited by human behaviours, and an extraction logic that is powerfully colonial in its biopolitics.

This information should not be disarticulated from our understanding of the history of the university as well as its futures, or from the assumption that the student is someone being prepared to ‘meet the needs of a changing labour market’. That formulation of ‘a changing labour market’ conjures up, in its Utopian ambition, something of the idea of individuals equipped to pioneer innovation in the Google economy or design new robotics; driverless automobiles. However, as we know, such positions of exceptional privilege are propped on the menial work of an increasingly voiceless population. These big-tech creative hubs, often in association with research universities, have massive impacts on local economies, deforming housing markets, displacing a class no longer described as ‘working’ but increasingly referred to as ‘under’: not a ‘working class’ but an ‘underclass’. The university becomes increasingly associated with dispossession and exclusion rather than access and opportunity.

## **Bodies of knowledge**

Let me draw on two case studies from the domain of the arts, in closing. My first case is based in the revolutionary idea ‘Occupy’ and draws on the recent work of the New York University (NYU)-based artist Walid Raad. Raad’s multiply-complex project ‘52 Weeks of Gulf Labor’ sought to keep in the public imagination the conditions of labour exploitation and human rights abuses in the Gulf states that occurred when developing capitalist emporia through the exploitation of indentured or effectively enslaved communities of migrant labour. Each week in 2010, a ‘Gulf Labor’-affiliated

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15 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016).



artist would launch an intervention that staged some aspect of the work regimes in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Raad, a Lebanese by birth, now living in New York, generated a self-renewing exploration in which new information or insights into the labour abuses ongoing in the Gulf region were mailed out. Subsequent initiatives have been various. One of the recent cornerstones of Raad's work was the Occupy Guggenheim project: Raad identified the ways in which high-stakes arts empires such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, the Louvre and the British Museum had sold the rights to their 'brands' and were being replicated through the building in the UAE of a high-end 'theme park' art world constructed from second-tier simulacra of the metropolitan art market on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi. On 1 May 2015, during Occupy Guggenheim, the Guggenheim Gallery in New York was 'occupied' by artist-activists who confronted that institution with the fact that it was implicated in condoning, 'in its own name', the exploitation of migrants who had their passports removed and their citizenship rights stripped from them, their freedom of association and of movement taken away during the building of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. (Similar abuses were also ongoing at the faux Louvre and various other cultural institutions on Saadiyat Island.)

Raad also worked up a deeply sardonic performance piece, a blend of economic fact and narrative fancy, creating a fable about the ways in which Arab and Jewish money conspire together behind closed doors in the generation of super-wealth through the manipulation of the art market. In 2015 Raad was denied entry to the UAE at Dubai airport, and his online open letter gives an account of the restrictions imposed on him, on the scholar Andrew Ross and on the artist Ashok Sukumaran, also members of the Gulf Labor group who have spoken publicly about the conditions of work in the region.<sup>16</sup> As Raad notes, he has his artwork held in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim, the Louvre, the British Museum; and so, in an oblique way, what these institutions engage in, implicate him too. This reminds me of the beginnings of the dialogue here yesterday, with George, about the place of the arts of resistance.<sup>17</sup> The arts have historically been in a complex and uneasy relation to patronage and power; and, increasingly, as value has been fugitive in global economies, the art market has become a haven of investment capital, with staggeringly irrational expenditure on prestige arts. The ambiguities here, too, of the compulsion of African and other artists from the global South to stray back and forth along a precarious seam of engagement and dissent are well known. It cannot be a 'taken for granted' that the arts spurn capital or power.

Raad's radical experiments are undertaken from his position as an artist-scholar at NYU, an institution where, I recently discovered, more female students evidently fund their studies through prostitution than at any other university. New York University is of course a real-estate enterprise: but what are the metropolitan

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16 See <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/an-open-letter-from-walid-raad/1657> (accessed 4 October 2017).

17 Editors' comment: Jane Taylor is referring to a question posed by George Agbo, then a doctoral candidate at the University of the Western Cape.



university's obligations to securing the well-being of its own student population through providing subsidised housing?

My second case study provides some insights into that 'occupation' most expressively associated with the biopolitical: the medical profession. I draw us here in closing back to Mbembe's observation that 'Western epistemic traditions are traditions that claim detachment of the known from the knower'. The saga behind this case came to my attention when I was making a work of theatre about the early modern era. The events turn on a remarkable series of events in 1650, the year in which Descartes died.

It is the middle of the Civil War, and Oxford is surrounded. The university is a Royalist enclave, and home to the now renowned Royal Society, a kind of proto think tank of a kind that even MIT might envy, with Robert Boyle experimenting on pumps; Christopher Wren, the architect who would go on to design the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire; Robert Hooke, the great manufacturer of microscopes; economist/anatomist William Petty and the medical pioneer Thomas Willis.

One cold December night a young working-class woman was hanged in Oxford for infanticide, her body given over to the medical fraternity (a brotherhood, of course) at the university for an anatomy, a typical procedure through which aspirant scholars could learn about the inner workings of the human body from personal observation. Because of her class position, the young woman was kin to the sheriff's officers who were in charge of her hanging, and she asked them to cling to her legs as she dangled, in order to hasten her death. When she was handed over to the doctors, she revived on the anatomy table. My engagements with the story have been various: the writing and directing of a work of theatre (on a commission from Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt), which has evolved into a substantial research interest in the history of infanticide as well as the origins of neurology. There are two named anatomists who come down through history: one is Thomas Willis, the man who became known as the father of neurology. Willis, in the decade after these events, lectured John Locke, philosopher. It is striking to become so aware of the fact that Locke, now known almost exclusively as a philosopher of identity, on the one hand, and of government and private property, on the other, had studied medicine at Oxford, and that he actually made a career as a medical practitioner. The other anatomist was William Petty, the son of a clothier, who had gone away to sea as a cabin boy, but was put ashore in Normandy after breaking his leg on board ship. He supported himself by teaching English while studying Latin with Jesuits in France. Ultimately, he travelled to the Netherlands to study anatomy, and became the secretary of the notorious atheist philosopher and economic theorist, Thomas Hobbes.

Petty, who was one of Oxford's most celebrated anatomists, went on to serve as Oliver Cromwell's physician-general in the campaign against Ireland. An immensely ambitious man personally as well as intellectually, probably because of the hardships of his youthful years, Petty secured the contract to map Ireland for Cromwell, and is responsible for the so-called Down Survey, so named because it was 'written down', a distinctive fact in an era of largely oral geography, particularly with regard to matters of land ownership and empire. Petty was rewarded with 33 000 acres (some

120 square kilometres of land) in south-west Ireland. Cromwell was dividing up the countryside in order to reward his loyalists for supporting him in the colonisation of Ireland. Petty's career would subsequently be marked by allegations of bribery and breach of trust. He was to become one of the most articulate early theorists of money in the seventeenth century, and is, like John Locke, one of the early thinkers who informed Marx's subsequent work on a labour theory of value.

The story resonates for me with Chakrabarty's distinction between 'natural history and human history'. Francis Bacon in the sixteenth century had inaugurated a commitment to observational scrutiny, and the human subject was increasingly empowered to peer at and into its object, the natural world. An exemplary instance of this new mode of thought can be observed in the astonishingly important field of anatomy studies, with human corpses flayed and examined internally by a newly enquiring generation of post-Galenic students of the workings of the body as an object of scrutiny. William Harvey observed the circulation of blood, and Natural Philosophy sought the answers to metaphysical questions through physical investigation. The university inherited this spirit of enquiry – it is our genius – but it is also the site of the radical gendering of the human body, the presumptions about the use values of the working-class body, and the ethics of indifference.

These pioneering years are not equivalent to our own: I do not wish to understate the differences. However, it is a story that suggests the ways in which the university experience launched men of intellect onto the world stage where they became brokers of power. It also points to the cultivation of the female anatomy as a site for investigation and scrutiny at the same time that land is parcelled out in structures of distributive reward and excision.

The logic of extraction has in the past century emboldened a radically experimental exploration of the human body, with medicine transforming itself from a therapeutics of care into an engine of biomedical entrepreneurship. Business and research interests intersect. Medical conferences, for example, routinely now are sponsored by pharmaceutical companies. A recent conference on rheumatoid arthritis in Cape Town was funded by a company developing new regimes for treating the condition, and the doctors at the conference were exposed to a series of presentations on the company's successes in medical trials. Moreover, we know about the impact of 'ratios of research in relation to financial return', with so-called 'orphan diseases' being defined as conditions experienced by groups of sufferers so small that they don't generate economic benefits for the company, and hence the research is not undertaken. It seems to me that companies are not well positioned to be overseeing this kind of research, and that the university should be precisely that kind of institution that considers the meta-research question of what kind of research is being undertaken, what its imperatives are and how to engage in steering that process.

Some decades ago, when I was first teaching at the University of the Western Cape, one of my more mature students, a man in his late twenties, perhaps, approached me with the information that he was about to be taken off his life-giving dialysis because his medical condition did not qualify him for a kidney transplant. Given the costs and demand for dialysis in this country, that had become medical policy. He was

circulating a petition that would advocate for the value of his life, his seriousness as a student and his potential advantages as a scholar within his community. His petition was refused.

I do not begin to interpret how such decisions are determined. These are some of the questions that should be the substance of thought in the postcolonial university. Given the history of the South African state's politicisation of medical research, it seems to me that the postcolonial university has an obligation to embrace such questions of policy across the humanities and human sciences. In closing, I return to Mbembe: 'We therefore have to rethink the human not from the perspective of its mastery of the Creation as we used to, but from the perspective of its finitude and its possible extinction.'