

Annual Report 2019



UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE

Faculty
of Arts 



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VISION AND OBJECTIVES

The vision of the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice is to promote transdisciplinary research engagement that focuses on the critical intersections between Religion and Social Justice through:

Facilitating ongoing debate and critical discourse on the intersections of Religion and Social Justice through conferences, workshops, seminars and other collaborations with civil society

Engendering activist collaboration between academia and civil society

Developing resources such as research and graduate fellowships for the transdisciplinary study of Religion and Social Justice

Publishing and disseminating the findings of research conducted within the Centre



Thematic Focus Areas of the Centre

Religion and Gender

Through this thematic focus area, the Centre seeks to foster critical research and civic engagement, which actively challenge the intersecting and systemic powers that produce and maintain the marginalisation and oppression of those who identify as female and queer. Projects within this thematic focus draw on the variety of resources available within feminist, queer and masculinity studies to develop knowledge and just-action in the complex and diverse areas where religion and gender intersect. These include, but are not limited to sexual reproductive health rights, violence against women, sexuality, queer identity, women and leadership, and religious and cultural laws and traditions.

Religion and the Economy

South Africa is regarded as one of the most unequal countries in the world, with growing statistics of income inequality, and the persistence of poverty. Economic justice is linked to moral principles which support the possibilities for people to live dignified material lives rooted in creativity and productivity. This thematic focus area seeks to interrogate the ways in which religion is implicated in the institutionalisation of economic oppression and examines the resources available within religion to destabilise prevailing imbalances of economic power. Furthermore, the ways in which gender, race, and ethnicity intersect with the economy of the sacred are explored.

Religion and the Environment

This thematic focus area foregrounds the role of religion in the pursuit of 'justice for the earth'. The religion and ecology research focus area critically engages the connections between anthropocentric and androcentric discourses and practices and examines the ways in which religion and the environment are connected with culture, economy, politics, community, heritage, and indigenous knowledge systems. Research in this area explores the position of religions and cultures in determining and contesting commonly accepted norms that constitute the relationships between and among all living beings.

Religion and Politics

With this thematic area, the Centre encourages research, conversations and partnerships that challenge the taken-for-granted nature of concepts and configurations such as democracy, equality, justice, reconciliation, and human rights in the social sciences and society. In light of the role of religion in general and Christianity in particular, in both the colonial and apartheid projects, the Centre is dedicated to exploring the possibilities for social justice through scholarship that engages religion as a critical concept and as a central component of human existence. This is demonstrated through our commitment to providing teaching and research that prioritises giving voice and visibility to religious traditions and aspects of religious experiences that have hitherto been marginalised in the academy.

Religion and Education

Given the decolonial fervour sweeping through the academy, the study of religion is undergoing a paradigmatic shift that the scholarship from South Africa is poised to lead. Critically reflecting on pedagogical praxis is a key task in this context – and therefore we focus on both transforming the content and the processes required for more decolonial, feminist and queer pedagogies.– Furthermore, under this theme, we conceptualise the postgraduate training workshops and supervision, offered within the Centre as a step towards 'educational justice'. The postgraduate training programme is a project in the decolonisation and democratisation of education. Through focussed thematic weekend workshops, the process of academic writing is demystified, while students are given the necessary support they need to navigate the research process.

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FOREWORD



**Director, Desmond Tutu SARChI Research Chair in Religion and Social Justice
Professor Sarojini Nadar**

September 2019 was dubbed the “September of Sorrow,” in South Africa – a month in which the country shook as GBV attack after attack came to light – A man murdered his wife after a marriage counselling session; a 25-year-old boxing champion was shot

dead by her ex-boyfriend who was a police officer; a 19-year-old student at the University of Cape Town, Uyinene Mrwetayana, went to fetch a parcel from her local post office, where she was raped and bludgeoned to death by a post office worker. Not even a week later, an 18-year-old 1st-year student, registered in the department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape, Jesse Hess, was found raped and murdered next to her 85-year-old grandfather who was also murdered in their home. Indeed, the country was in mourning and in deep sorrow. But, we were reminded that sorrow is not enough.¹ September 2019 was a stark reminder that even the most progressive legislative change and policies are not enough to ensure women’s safety because “women are dying with protection orders in their handbags!”² It is because sorrow is not enough, that the work we do in the Centre under the thematic focus area of Gender and Religion is so important. Feminist scholars of religion have convincingly shown that laws and policies do not function independently of the religious and cultural values that people hold about gendered norms – interrogating religious and cultural belief systems about gender is therefore as critical in gender-based violence interventions, as making laws and policies about it.

Recognising that gender-based violence is part of a matrix of other oppressions – race, class religion – is equally important. Indeed this is why the research that we produce about the intersections of religion and social justice has important implications for social change.

Ongoing Research Projects

In collaboration with the SARChI Chair, two new research projects (in addition to our ongoing ones) were registered. The first is a book project for which a proposal has been accepted by Orbis Press, New York. The book, titled “Thinking Tutu: Theorizing Social Justice through the Life and Work of Desmond Tutu” will be co-authored with leading African theologian Professor Tinyiko Maluleke. I spent a month in Geneva in September 2019, trawling through the World Council of Church’s archives in search of primary material such as letters, sermons, public talks etc. which can lend further insight into the academic and activist legacy of Tutu, as he engaged with matters of religion and social justice. The project is progressing well with an anticipated publication date of 2021.

¹ Mark Rountree “Sorrow is not enough to fix ourselves and our country”, *Daily Maverick*, 4 September 2019

² Mbuyiselo Botha, “Women dying with protection orders in their handbags”, *Sowetan Live*, 19 June 2019

The second project forms part of the focus of the Centre and the Chair on religion, politics and diversity. The project is called “Between the ‘Rainbow Nation’ and ‘God’s own Country’: Religious Freedom, Diversity and Pluralism in the Cape and Kerala.”

The purpose of the project is to critique a growing body of literature which examines religious diversity and pluralism within models of ‘tolerance’, ‘harmonious living,’ and even missiological paradigms framed within loose notions of “inter-faith dialogue.” Many of these studies fail to recognise the politics of such discourses and often miss the nuances and complexities that lie between the ‘occidental’ and ‘oriental’ tropes which frame much of the debates and discussions. Such studies, with the exception of a few, have been historically conceptualised, analysed and theoretically advanced primarily within a Global North frame of reference, which often keeps Christianity as the centre, seeking to understand other religions at best as marginal to, and at worst in service of Christian-normative structures. A decolonial turn within religion studies problematizes dominant frameworks of interpretation that seek to centre Christianity within discourses on religious diversity.

This project locates itself within this turn, seeking to understand the multiple and nuanced ways in which religious pluralism and diversities may be theorized as well as the ways in which religious freedom may be practised. An exploratory research visit to Kottayam and Trivandrum was made by myself together with Dr Lee Scharnick-Udemans and Dr Johnathan Jodamus, in December 2019. This visit mapped important future areas for exploration, not least of all because the concept of religious diversity and pluralism was being put to its hardest test through the Citizenship Amendment Act, that was being passed during our time there. We got to bear witness to the protests as well as the debates which characterised the passing of this bill.

In addition, a number of important research collaborations were made, and these were followed up in February again. An anticipated research exchange with Dr Mothey Varkey, from Mar Thoma Theological Seminary, Kottayam did not materialise, due to travel restrictions. The project, however, is taking shape and it is anticipated that a publication will soon emerge.



From left: Dr Scharnick-Udemans, Dr Varkey and Prof Nadar in Kottayam, India

Highlights and Achievements

I am particularly pleased to report on the following highlights and achievements from 2019.

- Upgrading of the NRF/DST/LMS South African Research Chair in Religion and Social Justice to Tier 1 status. The award of the Chair to Professor Sarojini Nadar indicates affirming and ongoing support for the graduate training and research that has been central to the work of the Centre and the Tutu Chair since 2016.
- Award of an international research visiting fellowship by the University of Exeter for Prof Nadar to visit the Exeter Centre for Practical Theology (EXCEPT)
- Dr Lee Scharnick-Udemans, Senior Researcher in the Centre, was the recipient of the NRF Thuthuka grant, for which she received funding for a three-year project on religion and the media. The grant is aimed at building capacity for emerging researchers.
- Travel grant awarded to Rhine Koloti, Masters student and research assistant, to attend the 2020 UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York. Unfortunately, the event was cancelled due to the COVID-19 threat.
- Partial travel grant awarded to Rhine Koloti, to present at the Association of Practical Theology Biennial Conference 2020 in Houston, Texas. This event took place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Masters student Rifqah Tifloen was invited by the Foreign Minister of Denmark and Norway in cooperation with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or `Belief Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UNFPA, the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, the Stefanus Alliance and the Danish Institute for Human Rights to participate in a one-year expert consultation process on freedom of religion or belief and the Sustainable Development Goals. In October 2019 Tifloen participated in a fully sponsored three-day workshop in Copenhagen.
- Dr Megan Robertson is the first PhD student to graduate under the auspices of the postgraduate cohort which began in 2017. We are also pleased to announce that Dr Robertson will be taking up a position as a postdoctoral fellow and researcher in the Centre.

- Dr Scharnick-Udemans was unanimously elected as secretary of Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa, and co-editor of the Journal for the Study of Religion

The above achievements signal a recognition of the work of the Centre in building capacity at the various levels of the scholarly community from graduate students to early-career and established researchers. While we celebrate our many achievements, we are still reeling from the unexpected passing of one of our most promising researchers, Dr Alease Brown, a postdoctoral scholar who was deeply committed to the decolonial struggles of women of colour in academia. A full obituary appears at the end of this report.

Continued struggle for women of colour in academic spaces

As always, our annual report showcases the important and significant work being done in the Centre, by an all-women led team. Our successes, however, are tempered by the many challenges we face as women of colour in a largely white and patriarchal academy. 2019 and 2020 were particularly challenging as much of our work has faced an undue and unfair amount of scrutiny from predominantly male scholars who feel challenged by the transdisciplinarity, decoloniality and rigour of our work. While it may be deemed unconventional to include this in an annual report, it is indeed important to do so, because it highlights that our work in the area of religion, gender and politics is not just cerebral and theoretical but very much embodied in our everyday struggles to survive in academia. We have taken very strong stances against the censorship and harassment we have experienced, and we continue to take courage from Desmond Tutu's words: "If you are neutral in a situation of injustice you have chosen the side of the oppressor... If an elephant has his foot on the tail of the mouse, and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

And so, we are once again reminded *a luta continua* - the struggle continues!

Sarojini Nadar, March 2020



Staff profiles

Desmond Tutu Centre Team

Director, Prof Sarojini Nadar also holds the Desmond Tutu SARChI Research Chair in Religion and Social Justice.



She obtained her PhD in 2003 from the erstwhile University of Natal (now UKZN), where she also held the position of coordinator of the International Network in Advanced Theological Education (INATE) – from 2002 to 2005. The network was based in eight countries and spanned five continents. In 2008, she was appointed to a permanent position as the Director of the Gender and Religion programme which she co-founded. She returned to this position in 2014 after a

two-year tenure as the Dean of Research in the College of Humanities at UKZN in 2012 and 2013. She was promoted to Associate Professor in 2011 and Full Professor in 2014. Nadar has graduated 17 PhD and 15 Masters students associated with this programme. Her numerous publications span diverse topics of research at the intersections of gender studies and religion, including gender-based violence, HIV, masculinity studies and most recently gender in higher education. She sits on five international journal editorial boards including the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, and she is also the editor-in-chief of the African Journal of Gender and Religion. Nadar is a B rated scholar by the National Research Foundation and has won numerous awards for teaching and research, among them the Department of Science and Technology Distinguished Young Woman in Science award in 2012; the Vice-Chancellor's Research Award at UKZN in 2015; the Distinguished Teachers Award in 2013. As an activist-academic, she is committed to intersectional socially engaged scholarship.

Senior researcher, Dr Lee Scharnick-Udemans' current research focuses on religious diversity and pluralism. It is important for both its intellectual contribution to the interdisciplinary and intersectional study of religion and for its social significance for understanding and enacting equality in a vastly inequitable world. Dr Scharnick-Udemans is also a trained filmmaker with expertise in documenting issues and phenomena related to the religious landscape in South Africa. In 2019 she was awarded a prestigious catalyst fellowship by the University of Edinburgh. Dr Scharnick-Udemans graduated with a PhD in Religious



Studies from the University of Cape Town in 2016. Trained in the study of religion and society, Dr Scharnick-Udemans researches, teaches and supervises in the area of religious diversity, pluralism, religion education, the political economy of religion, new religious movements, and the media. She is the co-editor of the Journal for the Study of Religion and the managing editor of the African Journal of Gender and Religion and secretary for the Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa.

Researcher, Dr Megan Robertson is a postdoctoral fellow linked to the SARChI Chair in Religion and Social Justice, researching in the area of queer sexuality and institutional church culture.



She is driven by a commitment to social justice and has a keen interest in developing method and pedagogical practice in that area. Dr Robertson did her Honours and Master's degrees in Sociology at Stellenbosch University and explored the ways in which race and gender are implicated in the institutional cultures of student residences and organisations at the university.



Administrator, Ms Ferial Marlie, has been with the Centre since late 2018. Apart from providing logistical and administrative support, she also has skills in online and print design, creating and updating social media pages, managing publication processes associated with academic journals, as well as a solid background in database administration, which makes her skills invaluable for postgraduate student administration.



Research Assistant, Nobesuthu Tom is a first-year Masters student whose research interests span African feminist theologies and African Traditional Religion. Nobesuthu coordinates the collaboration between the Centre, the UWC chapter of the Circle for Concerned Women Theologians and the broader Circle community.



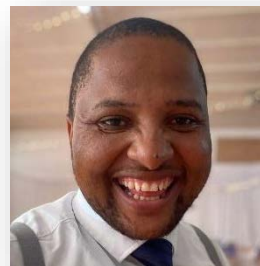
Research Assistant, Rhine Phillip Tsobotsi Koloti, a Master's student researching in the areas of sexual violence and pastoral care. He tutors for an honours module offered by the Centre, Religion and Social Justice. Toby is also currently serving as the Anglican Students Federation's Gender, Education and Transformation officer in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.



Research and journal assistant, Ashleigh Petersen is a Master's student researching in the areas of media and clergy sexual violence. Her research interests are gender-based violence as it pertains to religion. Her thesis focuses on Cheryl Zondi's testimony in the Omotoso trial, exploring how social media publics support and challenge normative religious understandings of gender and power in the context of clergy sexual abuse.



Research and journal assistant, Sakeenah Dramat is a first-year Master's student whose research interests are in religion and media studies. Her study centres on the portrayals of Islam and Muslims on a public broadcast television programme in South Africa.



Journal Assistant, Sonwabile Nkwali is an Honours student interested in engaging understandings of masculinities, fatherhood and suffering among Black Christians of the Methodist tradition.



Visiting Scholar

Fulbright Scholar, Dr Evelyn L Parker is a Susanna Wesley Centennial Professor of Practical Theology at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. Parker received the Bachelor of Science from Lambuth College, Jackson, Tennessee, the Master of Science from Prairie View A&M University, and the Master of Religious Education from Perkins School of Theology. In December 1996, Evelyn earned her PhD from the Joint Program of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary/Northwestern University in Religious and Theological Studies, with an interdisciplinary emphasis in Christian Education, Womanist approaches to religion and society, and education and public policy.

SEMINARS AND ROUNDTABLES

ACADEMIC INTERVIEWS

The academic interview-style seminar has become a hallmark of the Centre and in 2019, two such events were hosted. We have found that this format of academic engagement is successful for three reasons. First, it unsettles familiar formats and patterns of academic engagement that discourage mutual exchange through ostensibly isolating guest speakers from the audience. Second, it allows for a level of spontaneity that the traditional lecture followed by a brief question and answer session format does not provide. Third, by placing senior scholars and experts in the field, in conversation with postgraduate students mentorship relationships are encouraged and meaningful networking opportunities are created.

African Traditional Religions with Dr Nokuzola Mndende August 2019, University of the Western Cape, South Africa



From left; Dr Mndende and N Tom



From left: Dr Scharnick-Udemans, Dr Mndende, Prof Nadar & N Tom

From the 4th to the 6th of August 2019, the Centre partnered with the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town to host leading expert on African Traditional Religion, Dr Nokuzola Mndende as a visiting scholar. The visit comprised two lectures at UCT and an academic interview on African Traditional Religions at UWC hosted by postgraduate student Nobesuthu Tom. Dr Mndende's short visit as a guest underscores the Centre's commitment to providing space for discussion of diverse modes of religiosity. In the academic interview, Dr Mndende and Nobesuthu Tom highlighted the multiple complexities underlying the intellectual and identity politics at play in the study and practice of African Traditional Religion in contemporary South Africa. The discussions were lively and robust with questions

emanating from both undergraduate students as well as professors from other disciplines. As a result of this collaboration, Nobesuthu Tom and Professor Asonzeh Ukah, head of religious studies at the University of Cape Town, are co-authoring a paper entitled, "African Traditional Religion: Status and Practice in South Africa."

Methodological Concerns in Research with Professor Evelyn Parker September 2019, University of the Western Cape, South Africa



From left: A Petersen, R Koloti and Dr Parker

On the 11th of September 2019, postgraduate students Ashleigh Petersen and Rhine Koloti hosted an academic interview on methodology in the study of religion and gender-based violence, with Fulbright visiting scholar Professor Evelyn Parker. Prof Parker is the Susanna Wesley Centennial Professor of Practical Theology at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University and has been on a yearlong fellowship at the Centre. In this academic interview, Prof Parker shared candid insights into the challenges she has faced in setting up her Fulbright project on religion and youth partner violence in South Africa. Fruitful discussions about the politics and economics of research followed interesting prompts and questions from the audience.

PUBLIC LECTURES

Freedom of Religion and Living Together

May 2019, Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation, South Africa



S Wahedi



From left: S Wahedi and Dr Scharnick-Udemans

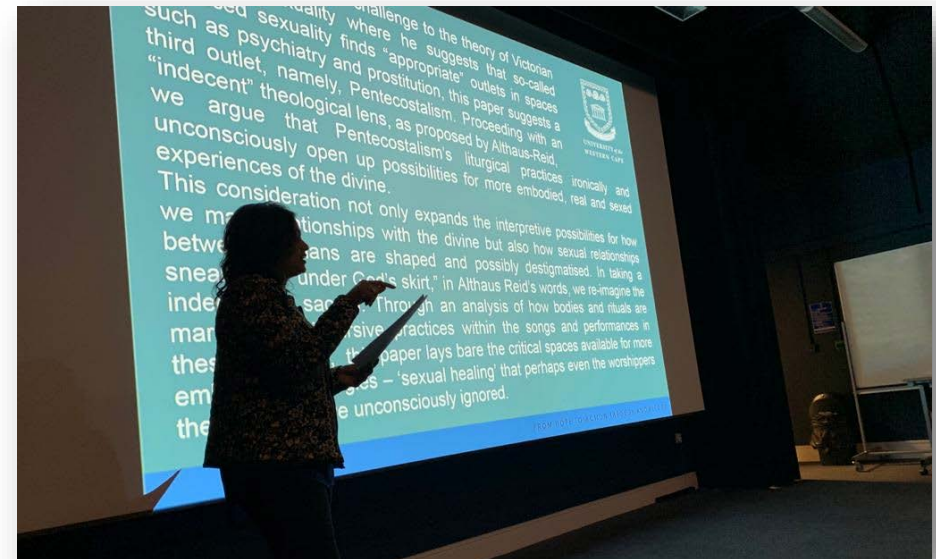
On the 18th of May the Centre, in collaboration with the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation, as part of a “Religion in Public Life series” hosted a public lecture delivered by Dr Sohail Wahedi from the Erasmus Graduate School of Law in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He presented a rousing lecture on the rise of Islamophobia across Western European countries and the dichotomous approach of liberal political philosophy to religion. He ended with a proposal for the development of a non-sectarian framework of arguments to defend religious freedom. Dr Scharnick-Udemans was the respondent to Wahedi and offered insights from the South African context. In her response, Scharnick-Udemans argued that despite the master narrative of peaceful religious coexistence, religious intolerance, particularly that which presents as Islamophobia is on the rise in South Africa. Furthermore, through a robust question and answer session, this lecture provided the opportunity for members of the university and the public to collectively ponder the potential and limitations of some of the most fundamental precepts of democracy.



Sanctifying Sex: Exploring ‘Indecent’ Sexual Imagery in Pentecostal Liturgical Practices’

June 2019, University of Leeds, United Kingdom

Prof Nadar presented a public lecture at the University of Leeds, based on a paper that was co-authored with Dr Johnathan Jodamus. The lecture entitled, “Sanctifying Sex: Exploring ‘Indecent’ Sexual Imagery in Pentecostal Liturgical Practices” was organised in collaboration with the Centre for Religion and Public Life at the University of Leeds and the Sheffield Institute for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield.



The lecture explored the possibilities that Pentecostalism’s liturgical practices may ironically and unintentionally yield sex-positive theologies. An insightful response was offered by Professor Adriaan Van Klinken on behalf of Charity Hamilton, a PhD student working in the field of body theology at the University of Leeds.

Sacred Sex, Sacred Text: Queering Religious Sexual Scripts in Transforming African Societies

June 2019, University of Exeter, United Kingdom

Prof Nadar gave a public lecture at the Exeter Centre for Ethics and Practical Theology (EXCEPT), at the University of Exeter in June 2019. The title of her lecture was “Sacred Sex, Sacred Text: Queering Religious Sexual Scripts in Transforming African Societies.” This paper is due to be published in the Oxford Handbook of Feminist Biblical Interpretation in 2020.

Marikana, Masculinities and Money

August 2019, University of the Western Cape, South Africa



From left: Prof Nadar, E McKaiser, Dr Scharnick-Udemans, Prof Gqola, L Naidoo, Adv S Samaai, T Mgqolozana and Dr Robertson

The Centre commemorated the anti-apartheid women’s march of August 1956 and the Marikana massacre of August 2012. As part of the commemoration, the SARChI Chair and the Centre convened a symposium on the theme “Economies of Violence” which included a panel discussion, book launch, and a public lecture.

The intersectional theme allowed the symposium to explore how various asymmetrical systems of power have, and continue to sustain the disproportionate indignity and poverty to which women, people of colour and marginalised men in South Africa are subjected. By bringing together academics, activists, as well as a public intellectual, the Chair and the Centre provided a space for critical public dialogue and social change.



E McKaiser

The public lecture was delivered by Eusebius McKaiser, on the theme ‘Marikana, Masculinities and Money’. In his lecture, McKaiser compared the personal narratives of unemployed black men who had called into his radio

show with the massacre that took place at Marikana.

He argued that the intersection of toxic masculinities and hyper-capitalism displace, destroy and disempower people of colour and marginalised men in South Africa, not only in outrageous acts of violence but in the subtlety of economic and social norms.

McKaiser argued that this is because toxic masculinities and hyper-capitalism simultaneously dehumanise black male labourers and humanises ‘the market’. In this way, the black mineworkers at Marikana, and black bodies more generally, are never regarded as human, nor as part of the moral community and therefore it is easy to oppress, disregard, violate and destroy those bodies.

The internal racist logic of capitalism, he argues, suggests that imagining black bodies as persons is equivalent to a child imagining their make-believe friend is real. McKaiser concluded by challenging academia and broader society to discuss and theorise understandings of capitalism. He suggested that it is not only necessary for scholars to theorise what a just economic system might look like (and whether it reforms or replaces capitalism) but also, to design a bridge from the present reality to the desired future.

Prof Zintombizethu Matabeni of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of the Western Cape provided a response to the lecture.



Prof Matabeni

For Matabeni, Marikana served to bring our attention to various social ills and conceptual issues including, liveability, death, exploitation, repression of workers, state violence, and precarious labour. Perhaps most significantly is the way in which the massacre highlights the injustice of the economic landscape of South Africa. However, she also critiqued the way in which Marikana had thus far been commemorated, namely through remembering the names and faces of the men that were violently killed. This narrow view of men and masculinities in Marikana, she argued, is exclusionary and sexist as it ignores women in

mining, female masculinities and a deeper exploration of the realities of Marikana. She therefore posed a critical-gender question to further add to the depth of those asked by McKaiser, “How do our everyday constructions of masculinities and black male bodies, turn the ‘thing’ (which Mckaiser spoke about) into a being?”.



Religion and Public Life: Research Symposium June 2019, University of Leeds, United Kingdom

In June 2019, Dr Scharnick-Udemans was one of two international guests to present at a faculty and student research symposium hosted by the Centre for Religion and Public Life at the University of Leeds. She delivered a paper entitled, “Politics, Privilege, and Pluralism: Exploring the Contestation of Religious Diversity in Contemporary South Africa”. In this paper, Dr Scharnick-Udemans explored the limitations of rainbowism in the study of religion.



WORKSHOPS

Grant-Writing Workshops



From left: Dr Madonsela, Dr Jodamus and Prof Ukah

As part of the Centre's commitment to capacity development, Prof Nadar has facilitated a series of workshops for early-career academics. These workshops have been directed at assisting with the development of research grant proposals and academic publication. One such workshop intended to support, five early-career scholars, Dr's Jodamus, Solomons, and Sakupapa from the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape, Dr Scharnick-Udemans from the Centre and Dr Fatima Seedat from the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Cape Town to apply for the NRF Thutuka Funding. The two-day workshop provided critical peer feedback on the development of proposals. In 2019 and 2020 respectively, Dr Fatima Seedat and Dr Scharnick-Udemans were awarded the NRF Thuthuka Grant for early-career scholars. Both the research projects for which the grants are earmarked contribute to the work of the Centre in profound ways.



Dr Seedat

Dr Seedat's project, *Legal Experience: Gendered Subjectivity in Muslim Women's Experiences of Muslim Personal Law in South Africa* is conceptualised in a decolonial epistemological frame that brings together feminist jurisprudence and feminist philosophy and African feminist theory.

Dr Scharnick-Udemans' project, *Mediatized Religion in South Africa: Representations and Productions of Diversity and Pluralism* locates religion at the intersection of critical media studies, political science and law in order to map a story of religion and religious diversity in South Africa that is intersectional, decolonial and multi-disciplinary.

Dr Demaine Solomons is awaiting the outcome of his 2020 application entitled "Black theology as unfinished business: Exploring the future of a theological discourse in South Africa." He has submitted this proposal both to Thutuka and to the Black Academic Advanced Programme. It is envisaged that more early career academics will submit proposals for funding through the mentorship provided in these workshops.

CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE

European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) June 2019, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom



Dr Robertson



Dr Scharnick-Udemans

The theme of the 2019 ECAS conference was “Connections and Disruptions”. Prof Nadar, Dr Scharnick-Udemans and Dr Robertson attended the conference which was hosted at the University of Edinburgh. Dr Scharnick-Udemans was awarded an Edinburgh Catalyst Fellowship which aimed to assist emerging scholars from Africa to form collaborations with scholars at the University of Edinburgh. As a result of an ongoing collaboration with the University of Leeds, Dr Scharnick-Udemans and Prof Adriaan Van Klinken, Director of the Centre for Religion and Public Life at the University of Leeds co-convoked a panel titled “Religion and Progressive Activism in Africa”. This panel, chaired by Prof Nadar, explored the role of religious thought, practice, language, ritual, and symbol in socio-political activism concerned with ‘progressive’ causes in Africa, especially as it relates to gender and sexuality.

International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) July 2019, Barcelona, Spain

Dr Scharnick-Udemans and Dr Robertson attended the 35th Biennial ISSR conference which gathered under the theme “The Politics of Religion and Spirituality”. Both representatives from the Centre presented papers. Dr Scharnick-Udemans presented a paper titled “Politics, Privilege and Pluralism: Exploring the Contestation of Religious Diversity in Contemporary South Africa”. Dr Robertson presented a paper titled “Performance and Production in the Field: Examining Queer Approaches to Queer Research through the Case of Queer Clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern

Africa”. The opening panel provided an exciting start to the conference and engaged the overall theme of the conference while situating the discussion firmly within the context in which it was held namely the Catalan region of Spain. Conference sessions provided a wide array of themes and allowed opportunities for emerging and established scholars to engage their research.



Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa (ASRSA) September 2019, Pretoria, South Africa



Academic posters



From left: Dr Robertson, A Petersen, Dr Scharnick-Udemans, Prof Maluleke, R Tifloen and R Koloti

The 41st annual ASRSA conference took place on the 4th and 5th of September. The SARChI Chair enabled the participation of three postgraduate students, Ashleigh Petersen and Rhine Koloti, and Megan Robertson, who accompanied Dr Scharnick-Udemans to this conference. The theme of the conference was Religion and Economy and panels presented on various areas of research ranging from miracle churches, tourism development, economy, land, food, politics and migration.

Dr Scharnick-Udemans’ presentation offered a nuanced worldview of a religious group, the Seven Angels Ministry, which has been ostracized by the media, society, and the academy. Ashleigh Petersen, Megan Robertson and Rhine Koloti offered poster presentations at the conference. Many conference attendees were impressed with the pedagogical method of using posters to present academic work and committed to exploring this method of presentation in their own contexts and future conferences.

Furthermore, the 2019 conference unanimously elected Dr Scharnick-Udemans as secretary of ASRSA, and co-editor of the Journal for the Study of Religion.

**American Academy of Religion (AAR)
November 2019, San Diego, United States of America**



From the 23rd to 26th of November 2019, Prof Nadar and Dr Scharnick-Udemans attended the 2019 annual conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in San Diego. Over 9,000 scholars of religion and theology from all over the world are members of the AAR and more than 5,000 attend each annual conference. As a participant in the African Religions panel, Dr Scharnick-Udemans presented a paper entitled, “The State of Religion in South Africa: Negotiating Diversity and Deviance.”

The paper discussed how between discourses of diversity and deviance, the contours and boundaries of religious freedom, religious diversity, and religious normativity can be mapped and interrogated. Professor Nadar was invited, as one of a range of experts in the field, to comment on two new books that were being launched at the AAR. The first was a book on gender, sexuality and religion, called “Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism and Arts of Resistance” by Professor Adriaan Van Klinken. Her response will be published as part of a roundtable in honour of this book, in the ISI accredited journal, *Religious Studies Review*.

The second book panel for which Prof Nadar provided a response was “Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality: Africana Lessons on Religion, Racism and Ending Gender-based Violence” by Professor Traci West. This presentation was particularly significant in that it served as one of many inspirations for the proposal of a named annual lecture in honour of Jesse Hess, a 19-year-old Theology student at UWC, who was raped and murdered in September 2019.

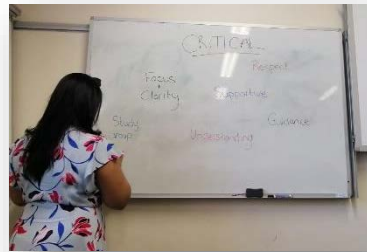


TEACHING

Honours Module, Religion and Society

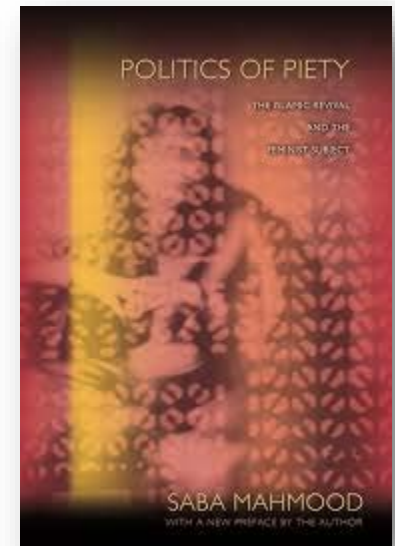
In the first semester, postdoctoral scholar Dr Megan Robertson is co-teaching an Honours module titled Religion and Society, under the theme of religion and social justice. She was teaching this module with late postdoctoral scholar, Dr Alease Brown. This course engages with how religion and culture inform understandings and constructions of gender, sexuality and race. Students are studying the potential that religion and culture hold for transforming these systems of power and what this means for current conceptualisations of social justice.

Religion and Theology Reading Group



In 2020 a reading group was established which brings together graduate students, emerging scholars and experts in the field to raise and discuss pertinent social issues against the background of critical methodological, theoretical, and contextual issues in the study of religion and theology. The reading group offers students and scholars the opportunity to read together and engage in a discussion that will respond to critical theoretical and empirical questions in the decolonial, feminist and trans-disciplinary study of religion in society.

This group also aims to provide another form of support for Honours and Masters students by encouraging the creation of a community of scholars. A particular aim for the group for 2020 is to develop and engage with interdisciplinary ways of thinking about and theorising research. Two key texts which the group aims to engage in 2020 are Adriaan van Klinken's "Kenyan, Christian, Queer" and Saba Mahmood's "Politics of Piety".



PILOT STUDIES

To test the feasibility of proposed research projects particularly those which have a strong empirical element, the Centre has found it prudent to set aside resources for the purposes of conducting short pilot studies. Since 2019, two members of the Centre, PhD Candidate Ishaya Anthony and Master's student Rifqah Tifloen have benefitted from this programme.

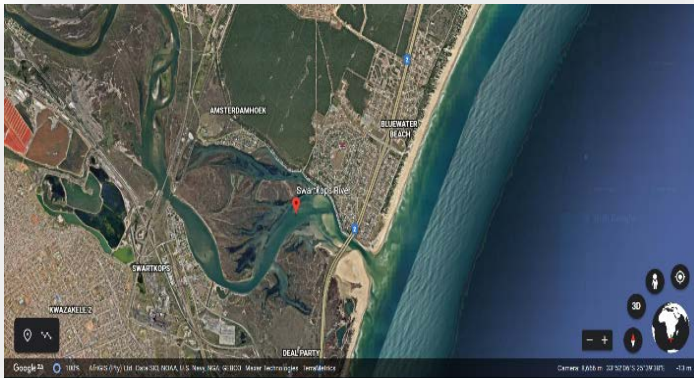
Anthony's PhD research engages the political economy of religious broadcasting in Nigeria. In this study, Anthony proposes to engage a hitherto unexplored site of research, the Anglican Cable Network of Nigeria.



In August 2019, Anthony travelled to Abuja, Nigeria to meet with broadcasting executives to obtain institutional consent and to physically collect copies of the data which he plans to analyse and without which the study would

not be possible.

The purpose of Tifloen's research is to explore the relationship between environmental care and the production of sacred natural sites (SNS) at the Swartkops estuary in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape.



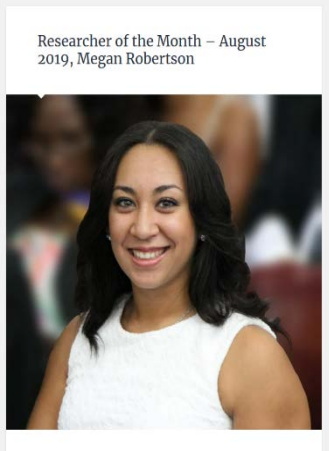
Over a three-day period in January 2020, Tifloen met with residents of the Aloes community situated on the banks of the Swartkops river and held an informal discussion about her research intentions.

As a result of these interactions the community has agreed to allow Tifloen access to do her research and to participate as co-researchers in an eco-cultural mapping exercise which will form the analytical foundation of the project.

FEATURES

Contributing to the visibility of the Centre and its research, in the past year researchers in the Centre have been featured on multiple public platforms.

Religion in Public blog feature



Dr Robertson was featured on the Centre for Religion and Public Life (CRPL) at the University of Leeds' blog, Religion in Public Life in the *Researcher of the Month* series.

This series aims to showcase the work of scholars in the field of religion and theology and demonstrate how their work examines the role of religion in public life.

The CRPL published the following on their blog:

Megan Robertson is a PhD student in the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape, in Cape Town, South Africa. As part of the

collaboration with the Leeds Centre for Religion and Public Life, she recently visited Leeds and presented her research about the experiences of queer clergy in the Methodist Church in Southern Africa.

Tell us a little about your 'research journey' – how did you get to where you are right now?

My experiences as a woman of colour in majority white educational spaces in a seemingly post-apartheid South Africa motivated me to focus my Master's research on students' experiences of residences at Stellenbosch University. After my Master's degree, I was disillusioned by academia and bought into the idea that dismantling social injustices and researching them were two separate tasks. Naively I thought that really "doing something" meant working in the NGO sector – which I did for three years in Cape Town. I soon realised that the binary between activism (or "doing something") and academia was a false and unhelpful one. I therefore sought out a place where I could combine the two while pursuing my research interests in religion,

gender and sexuality. This eventually led me to registering for my PhD and working in the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice.

Who, or what, sparked your interest to work on your particular research area?

Being raised Methodist shaped a considerable part of my identity and worldview. The congregation which I grew up in not only shaped my belief systems but perhaps more significantly it was a place to which I felt I belonged. As a teenager and young adult I became more involved in the broader provincial and national structures of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), and I often experienced these spaces as patriarchal, racially segregated and hierarchical. I was also deeply involved in the Church at the time when Ecclesia De Lange, a Methodist minister, was excommunicated from the Church for declaring her intention to marry her same-sex partner. Therefore, for me, the Church and religion became both a place of significant belonging as well as a space for a great deal of injustice. These experiences led me to question how others negotiate these competing experiences. I was particularly interested in the experiences of queer clergy who are both deeply entrenched in the institution and simultaneously excluded by it. The politics, scholarship and commitment of my supervisors Prof Sarojini Nadar and Dr Johnathan Jodamus has also continued to motivate my interest in the broader field of religion, gender and sexuality.

What are you currently, or about to start, working on?

My most important project at the moment is completing my PhD which I aim to submit in November this year. In my research I explore the lived experiences of queer clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. I am interested in how lived experiences intersect with institutional cultures. In addition I am preparing a manuscript for the Routledge Handbook on Religion, Gender and Society as well as co-authoring a paper on critical pedagogy in the area of gender, ethics and sexuality. I am also the Associate Editor for the African Journal of Gender and Religion and we are currently working on the December 2019 special edition of the journal which will focus on Religion, Gender and Media in Africa.

In what way(s) do you feel your research examines the role of religion in public life and the relationship between the two?

In South Africa anti-queer attitudes are propped up by religious moral claims and with discourses about queer sexualities as un-African and as secular Western import.

Therefore, in a national context where religion infused with discourses of tradition and culture are used as the backdrop against which many declare their opposition to non-conforming sexual orientations and gender identities, the church becomes an important institution in framing and transforming this debate. My research focuses particularly on the MCSA as it is statistically the largest mainline Protestant denomination in South Africa and holds significant positions of power and influence on national interdenominational and political platforms, not least of all because it is the 'church of Mandela.' The MCSA, therefore, holds significant influence on the larger church's moral, public and political transformation agenda. Further, by using the lens of lived religion (which I argue is a queer lens), my research explores how studying the everyday and ordinary experiences of clergy within denominations disrupts scholarly trends in the field of religion and sexuality which either characterises institutional religion as singularly oppressive or homogenises queer Christians as inherently subversive. In my research, I challenge these representations and explore a more nuanced understanding of the role of institutionalised religion and religious authorities by empirically researching the everyday lives of clergy, both inside and outside of the assumed sacred boundaries of the institution.

The article is available at <https://religioninpublic.com/2019/08/24/researcher-of-the-month-august%CB%90-megan-robertson/>.

Shiloh Project blog feature

Founded in 2017, The Shiloh Project is jointly run by staff from the Universities of Sheffield, Leeds and Auckland. The project explores the intersections between rape culture, religion and the Bible and actively works towards the elimination of gender-based violence. In the past two years, the Shiloh Project has participated in the United Nations' 16 Days of Activism (which span from 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, to 10 December, Human Rights Day) by profiling individuals and organisations affiliated with the Project. Dr Robertson was featured on the blog.

Full article is available at <https://shiloh-project.group.shef.ac.uk/un-16-days-of-activism-day-14-megan-robertson/>

Al Jazeera feature

In March 2020, Dr Scharnick-Udemans was interviewed by media network Al Jazeera which is renowned for its critique of global news coverage and media trends. The interview focused on the relationship between the media and televangelists in South

Africa. Dr Scharnick-Udemans discussed the apparent rise of televangelism in South Africa but also offered critique of the ways in which the TV pastors are often portrayed as manipulative, exploitative and deceptive. The interview also engaged with the regulation of religion and media in South Africa. More specifically Dr Scharnick-Udemans discussed the ways in which the media often uncritically problematises televangelists by making truth claims and assumptions about what is deemed “authentic” Christianity.

NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Centre for Religion and Public Life Partnership



As part of the Centre's ongoing partnership with the Centre for Religion and Public Life at the University of Leeds, the team planned to visit Leeds and Sheffield University in June 2020. This visit would have included a half-day conference in Sheffield where Professor Sarojini Nadar, Dr Lee Scharnick-Udemans, Dr Johnathan Jodamus and Dr Megan Robertson would have presented their respective research. In addition, the team were to be interviewed for a podcast series on religion, the Bible, Gender-Based Violence and rape culture. The team would have also participated at a master class hosted by the CRPL which would have featured a keynote address by renowned scholar of African sexuality, Prof Marc Epprecht.

Strategic Institutional Partnership with Ghent University



Since 2019 the Centre for Humanities, the Centre for Multilingualism and Diversities Research and the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice have participated in a joint PhD programme with Ghent University. The partnership is characterised by a series of workshops and exchanges over a four-year period. Two PhD Candidates from the Centre, Ishaya Anthony and Leona Morgan have registered with the departments of communications and health sciences at Ghent University, respectively. Prof Nadar and Dr Scharnick-Udemans together with Ghent colleagues Dr Kris Rutten and Prof Ines Keygnaert will engage in the joint supervision of their projects.

In December 2019, UWC and the Ghent cohort met for a 2-day workshop during which students presented their research for comment and to deliberate on the partnership theme "Turning Diversity into Capacity". The dates for the next cohort meeting were set for 4-5 May 2020 in Ghent, Belgium, but has been cancelled due to COVID-19. Prof Nadar accepted an invitation to deliver the keynote address at the opening proceedings of the upcoming workshop.

RESEARCH TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Cohorts

The main teaching portfolio of the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice is characterised by graduate training workshops and graduate supervision. These workshops are framed from an understanding that education ought to be decolonized and democratized, as students are equipped with the academic skills and support systems necessary to ensure that they are able to progress at a pace that is commensurate with the particularity of their individual projects and commitments outside of the academy.

Writing Retreat I

June 2019, Joie de Vivre Country Estate, Klapmuts, Paarl



Knowledge intake ought to become knowledge translation, therefore the skills we acquire from the workshops and seminars must be translated into writing, i.e. complete thesis/dissertation proposals and dissertations. In order to ensure this, the Centre offers students a week-long writing retreat as a means of creating an atmosphere of focus for productive writing. This year our first-year students (PhD and Masters), attended the retreat held at Joie de Vivre conference facility in Klapmuts, Paarl. During the retreat, both students and their supervisors committed themselves, around the clock to the writing process.

The main goals of the retreat were:

- to help students to learn from each other about the process of writing;
- to create a multidisciplinary community of research writers who would provide
- support and advice to one another;
- to explore the important links between teaching, research, writing and scholarship;
- to have a productive working experience in which each participant would commit to a specific writing goal and try to achieve it. (Moore, 2003)



Reviews and Testimonials:

"Having worked in the corporate world for many years, I was very aware that the investment put into the writing retreat was far greater than the actual cost of accommodation and catering - unlimited access to the academic experience of four PhDs, one of which was a professor and, add to that, an estimate of their remuneration day rate, you end up with an investment that far surpasses the value perception of any academic retreat. For me, the writing retreat was a true demonstration of the spirit of generosity on the part of the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, the supervisors and my peers".

- Nobesuthu Tom, Honours Student, Religion and Theology, University of the Western Cape

"A huge privilege to be part of a retreat that allowed me to explore, daily, the important links between research, writing and scholarship. A secluded space of minimal distractions and maximum productivity as far as writing is concerned".

- Toby Koloti, Masters Student, Religion and Theology, University of the Western Cape

"My work was used as an example for most of the retreat, and by putting it up there on the screen, it allowed me to notice my own faults, and gave others the opportunity to give me valuable feedback. Although it left me completely vulnerable, it was not a scary or embarrassing vulnerability, but rather one of development and growth. That

is always my favourite part of the cohort, knowing that I will leave with so many new ideas and improvement suggestions that can only better the quality of my work."

- Ashleigh Petersen, Masters Student, Religion and Theology, University of the Western Cape

Writing Retreat II

October 2019, Protea Hotel Saldanha Bay

The Centre hosted its fourth successful writing retreat for postgraduate students. This retreat was framed as a “finishers” retreat, which provided the space and support for students who were completing either their proposals or chapters of their dissertations.

The writing retreat was attended by eleven students and nine mentors and supervisors. The retreat began with students presenting posters which summed up their research projects. This was a useful exercise as it allowed students to reflect on their research projects as an integrated whole which required each part to be well-developed and holistically thought through. This was followed by in-depth presentations where students focused on specific chapters or areas of their research which they felt needed the most attention. This allowed students to receive and provide feedback as well as to identify areas of writing which required their focus for the week.

The writing retreat provided students with plenty of dedicated writing time. Students were also able to make appointments with any of the mentors and supervisors throughout the week to discuss their work. A writing coach was also available for individual consultations throughout the retreat.



The retreat ended with an emotionally charged concluding session. Many of the students have been attending cohorts together for three years and this retreat signalled the end of their journey. The closing session provided an opportune moment for students to reflect together on the personal and academic challenges and successes which they have experienced and a final opportunity to offer affirmation and support. This serves as evidence of the scholarly community produced by the cohort programme and signals the necessity and strength of the holistic system of support and supervision the Centre has developed for postgraduate students.

As an outcome of the writing retreat mentors and supervisors were able to complete their own work. Articles by Prof Sarojini Nadar and Dr Fatima Seedat, as well as by Dr Alease Brown have since been submitted for publication and will be published later this year. One of our PhD students, Dr Megan Robertson also completed her findings chapters during this week and successfully submitted her final dissertation in November 2019. Two Masters students, Ashleigh Petersen and Rhine Koloti, also completed their proposals during this week which they have since submitted and both been accepted. Almost all other students on the writing retreat were also able to complete significant portions of their dissertation chapters.

Reviews and testimonials

“I had an overwhelmingly positive experience of the UWC DTC cohorts in 2019. From the organisation of the sessions to the depth of feedback given to all participants, the space presented the perfect opportunity for workshoping rigorous academic research. On the surface, every session had sufficient materials, food, and drink for all participants which was welcome given the inevitable hair-pulling academic research yields. It was lovely having tea breaks in between furious writing and getting to vent about the day’s difficulty. But beyond the easy camaraderie the organisation of the space offered, the ability of the workshop coordinators to fuel creative energy was exceptional and fed me more than coffee and biscuits ever could. Every roadblock I had in my research, most of which was methodological, was met with an incredible amount of patience and intense thinking energy. Academia is notorious for being a lonely field – images of students locked away in dusty libraries on two hours of sleep and Maggi noodle dinners come to mind here. But in the DTC cohorts, I felt like I was finally able to breathe in a space where I knew my breath would be felt. I am really grateful for the progress I made with those colleagues and the care with which everyone’s issues were seen. I mean it when I say that I was academically fed, clothed, and sheltered amongst some of the greatest minds and hearts I’ve ever encountered.”

- Andy (Ariana) Smit, Masters student, University of Cape Town

“My first day at Cohort was a rude awakening. My idea was unpolished, I could not even properly articulate it for myself let alone share it with strangers. Soon after we did our introductions, we got into groups to help each other develop our ideas, to be later presented in a process called gallery walk. The way it worked was, in our groups we would write on posters entailing the purpose of our research and answer the three research questions; who, what and why? Then put them up on display, walk poster to poster with each of us presenting our ideas.

Our group interactions were quite intense and fruitful. We were thrown into a situation where for the first time we were forced to think deeper about our research. We were compelled to also assist each other because we soon realised, we were in the same boat, this forged a sense of instant solidarity. We hardly knew each other’s names and yet we were caught up in robust engagements about important work that carried our aspirations and futures.

When my turn to present came, the feedback felt like a baptism of fire! I acknowledge, it was tough at the time but with hindsight, something I’m grateful for. I was also humbled that so many smart people took time to engage with my work and interacted with it in ways I had not thought of. Now in my second and final year of my research Masters, I credit my progress to my cohort journey. Cohort creates a support group where we hold each other accountable with regards our research goals. Given the many obstacles I faced in 2019, being part of the cohort stopped me from dropping out and strengthened my resolve to complete my research.”

– Gaboitsiwe Kgomongwe, Masters student, University of Cape Town

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Prof Sarojini Nadar and Dr Fatima Seedat are the Editors of the African Journal of Gender and Religion

Prof Nadar serves on the following Editorial Boards:

1. Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion
2. Feminist Studies in Religion Book Series
3. Journal of Africana Religions
4. Women Studies International Forum

Prof Nadar also serves in the following capacities:

Member of the Executive Evaluations Committee of the National Research Foundation

Dr Scharnick-Udemans has rendered the following Academic Service:

Reviewer for Alternation, Interdisciplinary Journal

Media Officer and Reviewer for the African Consortium for Law and Religion Studies

Managing Editor: African Journal of Gender and Religion

Co-Editor: Journal for the Study of Religion

Secretary: Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa

Executive Member: Faculty of Arts Higher Degrees Committee

Dr Megan Robertson has rendered the following Academic Service:

Reviewer for Journal for the Study of Religion

Associate Editor: African Journal of Gender and Religion

Glorious Vessels International Chat Group,” Peter Oderinde invited readers to explore online lived Pentecostalism through the instant messaging service, WhatsApp. Drawing on the mediatization of religion theory, Nelly Mwale, in her article, “The Nature and Significance of a Muslim Woman’s Contest for Mayor of Lusaka, Zambia,” argued that, during the mayoral campaign, the media acted as a conduit for relaying messages on Islam. In this article, she traced the potential and limitations of the ever-popular mediatization theory in the Zambian context. Sokfa John’s article, “Computing Cupid: Online Dating and the Faith of Romantic Algorithms,” foregrounded the power and expanse of the algorithm, a “quiet and opaque object employed to process and turn into capital the massive data that are continually generated from our digital life and practice.” He explored how, using conservative theologies and algorithms, religious dating sites reinforce religiously sanctioned heteronormativity and illustrates the way in which Christian morality is implicated with technological processes. Siyabulela Tonono’s contribution, “Uyajola 9/9 uTata’kho: Missionaries and Black Masculinities,” sought to highlight the relationship between contemporary depictions of black masculinity featured on direct broadcast satellite service television and nineteenth-century missionary depictions thereof. In “Gender, Religion and the Media: An Analysis of Selected Media Representations of Fungisai’s Images and Music,” Pauline Mateveke used Homi Bhabha’s conceptualisation of hybridity as a third space or culture to track and analyse the resistance of a female Zimbabwean gospel artist to the socially acceptable female gospel artist image. She also explored the multiple manifestations of religious power which constrict and regulate women’s participation in society in general and the gospel music industry in particular. Finally, Cherry Muslim’s contribution “Shifting Dynamics of Safe Spaces for Women in Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary Egypt: A Reflection on the Article, ‘We are not Women, We are Egyptians’,” considers how, during intense moments of political unity, gender norms for women were temporarily suspended and then abruptly reinstated. Muslim explores the limitations of “online” activism and its repercussions for “offline” intersections in a heavily censored regime. Drawing on Saba Mahmood’s concept of subversive piety, she argues that cyber-feminism is an alternative space wherein women are able to experience limited safety from male violence while being able to practise the power of political voice.

REMEMBERING ALEASE



³Dr Alease Brown was a postdoctoral fellow at the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice. Her doctoral dissertation filled the gap in scholarship related to the

racialization of “nonviolence” discourse in the Christian tradition. Brown earned a B.A. in African American Studies from Smith College, a J.D. from the Univ. of Pennsylvania, and an M.Div. from Duke Divinity School, all in the U.S. She was a Candidate for Ordination as an Elder in the United Methodist Church, Western North Carolina Conference, and a lay preacher in South Africa. Brown’s teaching and preaching connected the life, teachings, and love of Jesus to issues of race, gender, and human dignity. Dr Brown wrote for international journals and delivered talks and presentations in Africa, Europe, and the U.S. She was working on her first book.

The Poem “When Great Trees Fall” by Maya Angelou is dedicated to Alease.

The Centre is planning a time when we can appropriately honour her memory.

³ This bio was taken from <https://www.aleaseabrown.com/bio-for-media>

When Great Trees Fall by Maya Angelou

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly
sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.

Great souls die and
our reality, bound to
them, takes leave of us.
Our souls,
dependent upon their
nurture,
now shrink, wizened.

Our minds, formed
and informed by their
radiance, fall away.
We are not so much
maddened
as reduced to the unutterable
ignorance of
dark, cold
caves.

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

