

Doing social research 'otherwise': a perspective from South Africa.

Taught by Dr. Mbuso Nkosi.

This course will explore the ethical dilemmas in studying communities on the 'margins' and considered powerless. I use my experience of a decade in researching farming communities in South Africa. The farming community in South Africa reflects the inequality in the country where the black farmworkers reside on the land owned by the white farmer. The farmer sees the workers as his children because of their tenancy on the farm. The economic and social relations on the farm are paternal. As a result, the social relations continue to be violent- the farmer disciplines the workers through the whip. At the same time, the white farming community has raised concerns about the violence on the farms where white farmers get violently killed in robberies. In such conditions, it is usually tough to interact with or study these communities because access has to be granted by the farmer. One of the difficulties has been the attempts to organise the farmworkers into trade unions that will represent their rights.

In the workshops, I will show the strategies I used to deal with issues of access, insider vs outsider dynamics, the importance of stakeholders in research, and the ethical dilemmas within my approach. Through participatory research strategies, I used to go on weekend visits to areas where farmworkers socialised to gain access to their social life. The other method involved writing to the farmer to gain permission to the farm- sometimes being rejected. I also mapped out stakeholders in the sector -like non-governmental organisations and trade unions to help me gain access to the community. To understand this 'workplace'- I drew on academic literature by Michael Burawoy, who has explored different work organisations and has argued that any work context involves economic, political and ideological dimensions. In thinking about my research strategies, I considered the importance of doing research ethically. In thinking about ethics, I went beyond a bureaucratic view of ethics which is about adhering to university protocols- to a question of what it means for researchers to engage with the 'Other' or the community of study. This course engages with calls in social research about 'doing social research Otherwise', informed by understanding the conditions of the Other.

This will be a three-day workshop. The initial two days will be dedicated to a deep dive into the research issues mentioned earlier. On the third and final day, we have an exciting book launch event scheduled. During this session, I will have the opportunity to engage with you and share the findings and insights from my latest book, titled 'These Potatoes Look Like Humans: The Contested Future of Land, Home and Death in South Africa.' This book, published by Wits Press in September of this year, explores critical themes that resonate with our course discussions.