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There Was an Ocean

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Once upon a time there was an ocean. But now it's a mountain range. Something unstoppable set into motion. Nothing is different, but everything's changed.

I figure that once upon a time I was an ocean. But now I'm a mountain range. Something unstoppable set into motion. Nothing is different, but everything's changed.

Paul Simon, "Once upon a time there was an ocean". Surprise, 2006

Paul Simon's lyrics capture a paradox. And because paradoxes must, by definition, embody profound truth, this signals something interesting, worth exploring further. Change emerges from the unchanging. The predictability and solidity of mountains and oceans foreclose on our ability to alter our environment. But, at the same time, they also enable us to navigate the world around us, including our intellectual and emotional conceptualization of experience. The ability of universities to bring about change and to produce new knowledge rests on this paradox. Like the ocean, they are robust and survive as organizational forms. Like mountains, they are solidly built and steeped in traditions and processes that may appear, and sometimes are, arcane. They remain reassuringly familiar, founded in disciplines and systems of accreditation that persist stubbornly. But they are also sites of new ideas and opportunities, unstoppable in their motion, which are entwined with their traditions.

This is also an opportunity to reprise an essay I wrote a few years ago and which was published in a collection that I edited with Marvin Krislov and David Featherman, both then at the University Michigan. My particular interest then was in the transformation of universities in South Africa. This was a process that began in the mid-1980s, when liberal but legally-segregated institutions such as the University of Cape Town began to admit black students and employ black staff in defiance of apartheid legislation. Transformation gained momentum after the first democratic elections in 1994, and was enhanced by the Bill of Rights, which is part of the South African Constitution of 1996. And yet the imperatives of transformation continue today, with widening inequality, extremes of opportunity in prior schooling and the complex intersections of race and class. Does this mean that these formal, constitutional changes have left everything staying the same?

To answer this question, a useful device is to draw a distinction between formal and substantive rights. Formal rights are those established in the legislation. For example, the constitution deals carefully with unfair discrimination and the right to redress in terms both of race, and also other “protected” categories that will be familiar to those interested in Britain’s equality legislation. Substantive rights are lived experience – what actually happens. Unfair discrimination on the basis of race is still prevalent. For instance, Sabie Surtee and I established in a report completed last year that, across a large sample of corporate employers in the Western Cape, black employees fail to be promoted through management ranks at an appropriate rate. Focus groups with black managers revealed extensive experience of discrimination (which Xolani Ngazimbi is exploring further in her PhD dissertation). Extensive failure of substantive right of choice in sexual orientation is also apparent. Despite being one of the first countries in the world to legalize same-sex marriage, lesbian, gay and bisexual people in South Africa are frequently abused. Nothing seems to have changed, yet everything is different. The legal basis that enshrines social justice and human rights has set something in motion in South Africa, that may take time to be realized, but which is unstoppable.

Understanding that institutions have both formal and substantive dimensions is useful in understanding some of the antinomies of transformation. The law is evidently an institution of society that includes both formal elements (the constitution, whether written or unwritten, laws and procedures, courts, police and prisons) and substantive elements, the everyday experience of legal restraint and opportunity, justice and policing. This, then, is what Clause 9 (the “equality clause”) of the 1996 South African Bill of Rights defines as the formal right of every person not to be discriminated against unfairly. Neither the state nor any individual may “unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth”. And here is Ndumie Funda’s substantive experience of unfair discrimination which led her to found Luleki Sizwe, a charity that campaigns for the end of the “corrective rape” of lesbian women: “I founded Luleki Sizwe after the deaths of my dear friend Luleka Makiwane and my fiancée Nosizwe Nomisa Bizana within two years of each other. Luleka was an outspoken advocate of women’s rights and gay women’s issues. She died of HIV/Aids in 2005, a few years after she was raped by her cousin, who later said he was ‘trying to prove to her that she was a woman’. My fiancée was gang-raped by five men because of her sexuality. As a direct result of the attack, she developed cryptococcal meningitis, an infection of the brain and spinal column, and died on 16 December 2007”. When these formal and substantive aspects of the institution of the law are set in motion alongside one another nothing is different, while everything has changed.

Education, including Higher Education, is also a social institution that can be understood in both its formal and substantive dimensions. These intersections are often attenuated by crises, as happened in South Africa in February 2008 when a video of white students abusing black staff in a university residence surfaced. As a consequence, the Minister of Education initiated an enquiry into the daily experience of staff and students in all the country’s

universities. The report from the commission concluded that racism was, and is, extensive to the detriment of both perpetrators and victims. This enquiry, however, would not have been possible in the old South Africa where racism was enshrined in the law.

One way of responding to circumstances such as these is to cast the edifices of the institution and everyday experiences of those in it, or affected by it, as irreconcilable. The failure of constitutional provisions is inevitable, the law invariably oppressive. Universities are bound to be reactionary and transformation no more than rhetoric. We can call this the Manichean view on the relationship between the formal and the substantive; irreconcilable contradiction. But another way of responding is to see the formal and the substantive in a constant, if often stumbling, dance together. In this view the structures and customs that, together, constitute “institutional culture” are constantly challenged by those affected by them, resulting in a continual process of both reaction and change. We can call this the Recursive view, building on the sociological thought of Anthony Giddens and others. Seen in this way, there is the possibility that activists such as Ndumie Funda will make the provisions of the Bill of Rights meaningful for lesbian women in townships, that the Ministerial response to a nasty incident of student racism will result in change across the Higher Education sector as a whole.

While I respect the informed and reasoned scepticism that is a central part of university life, and which is defended by the principles of academic freedom, I reject the Manichean view. Indeed, it would be notably cynical to hold a leadership position in a university while believing that institutional transformation that is meaningful in terms of human rights and social justice is not possible. I also believe that we should use those same research methods that we deploy in our everyday lives as academics in stepping back and analysing the university itself as our “site of practice”. Such self-analysis recognizes the recursive relationship between modes of inquiry – knowledge-making – and the structures of the university as an institution. It can also help us become better at what we do.

When we think about what we do at universities, we tend to start with the formal structures that organize our lives. Most universities conceptualize and organize their research and teaching in terms of disciplines, which appear as unchanging and as rock solid as mountains. However, the reality is that there is continual volatility in the conventions we use to classify and define fields of knowledge and sets of practices can again be seen as the interplay between the formal and the substantive at work. There is, in fact, no agreed catalogue of the disciplines. The subject coding for British universities is the Higher Education Statistics Agency’s Joint Academic Coding System (JACS); other countries use other systems. But although we tend to behave as if the identity and nature of disciplines are self evident and fixed, this is clearly not the case. I qualified as an Archaeologist and studied in a department that included the three disciplines of Archaeology, Social Anthropology and Physical Archaeology. I have published extensively in peer-reviewed journals uncontroversially badged as archaeological. And I do not accept the JACS definition of Archaeology as a discipline, since it excludes my entire field of interest and expertise.

The point, of course, is that disciplines are contingent. They come and go. Eugenics and Craniology, once regarded as leading-edge, are no longer with us. English Literature is now

a bulwark of academic respectability; in the late nineteenth century it was considered vulgar and inappropriate in a university. We have new disciplines, such as Nanotechnology and Bioinformatics, recently invented.

All systems of classification are selective and privilege one aspect over another. Some of these classification decisions may be relatively settled. Others may not be; for example, the continuing hysteria over Chinese Traditional Medicine as a legitimate discipline in British universities. Very often, things are exacerbated because complex interests are mapped on to disciplinary definitions. If, for example, the JACS definition of Archaeology were to be enforced, a significant sub-set of archaeologists would lose their jobs because they are self-defined as Medieval or Post-Medieval specialists (HESA only allows that archaeological study extends to “the dawn of civilization”, which renders everything that happened in Britain after the Roman Empire decidedly uncivilized). At the same, trans-disciplinary work is constantly challenging the legitimacy of established classifications of knowledge, and showing how new conjunctions can provide new insights. Consider, for example, the swathe of creative disruption that Michel Foucault’s writing caused, emerging from the discipline of Philosophy and undermining long-held assumptions across the full range of the humanities and social sciences.

Classification is, however, necessary and the ordering of knowledge into fields and sites is the beginning of the process from which current classifications, whether HESA’s JACS codes, or the academic departments that are set up in a particular university, may be transformed over time. Legislation, regulation and ordering are the scaffolding for the claims against the rigidity and legitimacy of disciplinary classifications, whether because the concept is offensive or obsolete (Eugenics) or because new work is intolerably constrained by current organizational arrangements.

Taking this further, though, and understanding how the recursive processes of institutional structures, traditions and also transformation work in an analytical register, requires an appropriate methodology. Bruno Latour’s work is useful here. In a now-classic study, Latour showed how a small team of researchers, experts in related but distinct disciplines, made meaning in an ecological study at the margins of the Amazon rainforest. They first collected specimens of plants and soils and identified and classified these using prevailing conventions. Others in the team collected and recorded other sets of data defined as relevant, such as rainfall and temperature ranges. These objects – specimens, data-sets, notebooks – were then circulated between collaborators, laboratories and conferences as comments, opinions, reports and research papers. Latour shows how knowledge of this aspect of the Amazon forest edge, previously a blank slate to science, is created and continues to exist through the continual circulation of “references”; objects that start with the initial specimens but which accumulate to include all subsequent writing and citations.

Latour’s way of analysing knowledge systems is useful because it includes the content of enquiry (plant and soil specimens, academic papers) and institutions – the disciplinary identities of the research team – in the same system of description and analysis. This makes

his approach valuable in looking at the recursive processes of institutional conservatism, which is also at the heart of its ability to transform.

Here is another example from South Africa which shows how this can work. The traditional inaugural lecture is part of the formal structure of the university, with academic dress and a procession, the introduction of the new professor, and the expectation that the new appointee will indeed profess her or his discipline, reinforcing its authority over its designated field of knowledge. In this case, though, the newly appointed Professor of Anatomy used the occasion to attack political interference in the study of human skeletal remains, and the role of organizations outside the university in limiting and damaging the work of science and scientists. He was, in effect, complaining that the established rights of the discipline of Physical Anthropology over a field of knowledge, and of the university as an organization, were being violated. His use of the formal platform of the inaugural lecture was a call to arms to defend the citadel of knowledge against the barbarians at the gate (my interpretation, I hasten to add, and not his words). But the existence of this tradition of the inaugural simultaneously insists that Professors are accountable to the public and that they should be called upon to demonstrate what they do and why. This lecture foregrounded issues of contention and took them into the public realm where they were being hotly debated. The issue was the treatment of burials unearthed in Cape Town, in Prestwich Place, as part of urban redevelopment. These skeletons – often intact and well preserved – are a scientifically significant sample of the Cape’s population in its key formative years, when the dockside community of slaves, colonial settlers and indigenous people were shaping the distinctive character and genetic identity of future South Africans.

As with similar cases in, for example, Australia, a full spectrum of positions rapidly formed up around the collection of skeletons. The formal claim of Physical Anthropology as the rightful owner of a scientific field, clear of political interference, was one. Opposing positions from within the academy included dissenting views from Social Anthropology, History and from those working across the disciplines. City authorities had responsibilities for urban conservation, planning permission and development. Community organizations that had been formed around issues of land rights and restitution saw the issue as one of rights to identity. The consequence was messy and unresolved set of arguments with no clear outcomes, where multiple interests jostled against the structures of legal and disciplinary frameworks.

What is of particular interest to us here was the set of recursive processes that were evidently acting on the university as an organization. Despite the claim to the unqualified authority of science that was made from the august tradition of the inaugural platform, it was apparent that others within the academy were by no means in unanimous agreement. It was also clear that the positions taken by local community organizations was shaping the view that the academy had of itself, and of its role in developing and disseminating new knowledge. Many actors had multiple roles and switched identities, sometimes appearing as academics and other times as community activists. And it was in unravelling, describing and analysing this complex web that we see how change slowly but surely occurs within the legal, disciplinary,

community and formal structures available to them, structures which act as both brakes and catalysts in unpredictable ways.

Latour's key concept of circulating references – the set of specimens, conversations, notes, publications, opinions that were the substance of new knowledge about the Amazon forest fringe – allows all aspects of a complex situation such as the Cape Town burial controversy to be considered as part of a single system of connections and flows. I have analysed these intersections in more detail in the journal *Anthropology Southern Africa*, along with responses from some of those involved, including the inaugural lecturer.

By the end of the sequence of events, though, none of the institutions is quite the same, or entirely different. For urban planners, for example, the public controversy over the Prestwich Place burials has become part of their lexicon of practice; next time a burial ground is discovered, their collective recollection of Prestwich Place will affect how they respond. The civic organizations emerge considerably strengthened because their existence depends on having issues to fight that have broadly accepted validity. Academic practice is constantly modified by engagements such as these, as scholarly work absorbs and responds to the consequences that follow from the processes of enquiry.

From Cape Town to Salford. Universities are ubiquitous organizations and their dynamics are familiar across continents. And universities invariably respond to their locations. In Salford, as in Cape Town, economic inequality and social marginalization are prominent characteristics.

Key indicators of households' economic and social circumstances are income deprivation, unemployment, health, levels of education, availability of housing and services, crime and the living environment. These are combined as an Index of Multiple Deprivation and aggregated as Super Output Areas, of which there are 144 in Salford, with between 1000 and 2000 people each. Salford is, in turn, one of 354 local authorities in England. When ranked by the Index of Multiple Deprivation, Salford is the fifteenth most deprived local authority area in the country, and is in the bottom five percent of all local authority areas. Six of Salford's wards contain Super Output Areas that are in the one percent of most deprived communities for England as a whole. The University of Salford is located in one of these wards, Irwell Riverside, and three others are our immediate neighbours: Broughton, Langworthy and Ordsall.

There are sound reasons of principle why a publically funded university should address the causes and consequences of stark inequality and marginalization in its immediate environment. Building on the Cape Town case, I want to show how knowledge-making may be driven, to the considerable community benefit by the interplay between the formal structures of institutions and everyday, substantive, challenges, debates and interests. The recursive interplay between formal knowledge structures and the substantive contexts in which we work will contribute to institutional transformation when the outcomes are better research and teaching; new and insightful knowledge and its improved and extended transmission through learning.

In some areas of work, this set of dynamics is obvious. A good example is Health and Social Care. Through practice and research in local communities, addressing the causes and consequences of the components that make up the Index of Multiple Deprivation for the full range of Super Output Areas, our research community is steadily building up a rich understanding of the epidemiology of the city. Practice and research is conducted within a set of generalized conventions for data recording, interpretation and the communication of results. These generalized conventions are themselves difficult to interrogate as they form the complex and defining methodologies of academic disciplines, which are steeped in interests and conservatism. However, at the same time this epidemiology will be comparable with the epidemiology of other cities, across continents, through networks such as the World Health Organization. Through contributions to a global community of practice, generalized insights into the profile and dynamics of urban health and wellbeing can be related back to the specific policy and practice requirements of Salford. Such cycles of engagement, reflection, research and re-engagement, alongside formal, traditional and established codes and conventions, drive forward knowledge systems, and are powerfully transformative of universities as institutions and simultaneously contribute to their constancy and survival.

These relationships may be less evident in areas of research which are traditionally – and I would argue, misleadingly – characterized as “blue-sky”. By again using Latour’s approach to science studies, we can see how a science discipline can be part of both a network of academic practitioners and also part of other, interlocking, systems of circulation.

The University of Salford’s Energy Theme originated in Physics and research into the energy properties of buildings using an experimental facility built within a laboratory. This will generate peer-reviewed academic outputs, published in accredited journals and returned as evidence of research quality in the Research Excellence Framework. This is conventional academic science at its best.

From this initial stage of project formulation, the potential contribution to Greater Manchester’s Low Carbon Economic Strategy was rapidly apparent. The Low Carbon Strategy is a separate system of circulation, concerned with public policy development, innovation, economic value and private sector opportunities. As a direct result of the alignment of these two systems, opportunities for field experiments in Council-owned houses in different parts of Salford have become available, to the benefit of all parties.

Because the Low Carbon Strategy is itself part of an integrated development plan for Greater Manchester, it is in turn aligned with job creation. Innovations developed in the laboratory and then tested in the field have the potential of creating opportunities for small and medium businesses and labour force development. By partnering with The Manchester College and Salford City College, we will be able to align a full suite of post-16 qualifications that can provide the training and qualifications needed for a successful low carbon economic sector.

These intersecting flows of references can be expressed as three networks, using the same format that I applied to the Prestwich Place burial ground example. This is shown in the table, below. I’ve labelled the three systems as “Education”, “Regional Development” and

“Science” and described the scope of each (it’s “panorama”), the academic disciplines with which each is associated, and the groups of practitioners most centrally involved. The rows below, as with the Cape Town example, are an unfolding sequence of events.

Education	Regional Development	Science
<i>Panorama: national Further and Higher Education systems</i>	<i>Panorama: national policy for regional economic development</i>	<i>Panorama: global circulation of scientific research outcomes</i>
<i>Discipline: Education</i>	<i>Discipline: Economics/ Public Policy</i>	<i>Discipline: Physics/ Built Environment</i>
<i>Group: Executives, Colleges and Universities</i>	<i>Group: Local and Regional Government</i>	<i>Group: Scientists</i>
Post-16 education policies	Policies for regional economic development	Global warming and climate change science
Future employability and appropriate qualifications	Low carbon economy as prioritized economic sector	Reducing carbon emissions in building stock
Skills development and qualifications for retrofitting	Existing housing stock for testing innovations	Experimental laboratory facility
Innovations tested in building simulations	Innovations tested in field	Product and process innovations
Aligned qualifications for workforce development	Appropriate public policy promulgated	Peer reviewed publications of research results
Improved employment for graduates at range of qualification levels	Targets for reduction in carbon emissions achieved	Knowledge exchange with product development partners

At first, these networks are not connected, and they can be imagined as discussions taking part in different parts of town. In one meeting, a group of executives from colleges and universities is gingerly exploring the potential benefits of future collaboration. Local Authority representatives are meanwhile meeting in the Civic Centre to discuss regional economic development policy. And at the university, the Physics Department is hosting a seminar from a visiting colleague who is outlining the latest evidence for the relationship between global warming and levels of carbon emission.

Each of these conversations evolves. The Physicists invite colleagues from the Built Environment to join them in putting in a Research Council bid for a project that will investigate how to reduce carbon emissions in existing building stock. The college and university administrators recognize that they need to work together to align the qualifications that they offer and the public servants decide that the Low Carbon Economy could be an

effective area to prioritize for regional economic growth. The administrators go back to their offices, the public servants drink tea and the academics go off for a beer.

The next stage, marked in bold in the table below, is when these three systems intersect, the equivalent of the cataclysmic discovery of the burial ground in Cape Town. Perhaps the university issues a news release about the energy project that catches the imagination of the local newspaper. Whatever the means of the intersection, from this point onwards the three networks become part of a single system of circulating references, accelerating momentum and simultaneously setting up new classifications, codes and formal laws.

The best way of reading the table is now horizontally, since the ideas are now playing off one another. The joint research group of physicists and specialists in the built environment, who have won their research grant, realize that they need facilities to further test their experimental prototypes. The local authority offers existing housing stock and the Further Education College suggests that trainee builders work with the new products to see how they will stand up to industry conditions. The local authorities invite the college and university administrators to a joint conference to map out a set of qualifications that will expand employment opportunities and attract inward investment.

Of course, I have here developed an example with idealized outcomes, in which everyone meets their objectives, and harmony ensues. In practice, as in the Cape Town case study, developments are likely to be less conclusive, messy and controversial. Indeed, there may well be reasoned or ethical objections that are voiced, and vociferous disagreements from within the university. A potential variant of the Salford Energy case could be, for instance, that specialists in materials development advocate the use of compulsory purchase orders to remove and replace older housing stock, only to be vigorously and publicly opposed by a coalition of community organizations and social historians supporting self-determination by affected residents. But the relationship between practical action and institutional transformation still applies. In any outcome, the development of learning and teaching opportunities intersects with research and innovation, workforce and economic development.

This leads in turn to a final example of the ways in which formal legislation, which tends towards tradition, must be rendered malleable by lived experience in a recursive network of stable change. It is an example which brings us back to Cape Town, in the circulating system of references that has constituted this presentation. As with South Africa, British universities are subject to legislation that seeks to advance equality for defined “equality strands”, broadly the equivalent of designated groups in South African legislation. And, as with South Africa, there is a clear danger that legislation, which is a vital site for resistance to the Apartheid past, will remain at the formal level as an issue of compliance.

Our Listen! strategy seeks to address this by taking a development approach to equality and diversity. The focus on “listening” evokes one of the founding values of the academy; a constant openness to new possibilities and a willingness to challenge and debate the status quo. Listening, in turn, leads to appropriate actions that advance respect for the values of diversity. This has been expressed by Judith Butler in her essay, “Giving an Account on

Oneself”, “our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves”. Our knowledge of ourselves is inevitably incomplete. Opportunities come from creating spaces for new voices to be heard. For a university, where respect for new thinking and expression is a founding value, the virtue of listening is paramount.

By taking a developmental approach, Listen! seeks the recognition of diversity and difference as educational assets, the protection and advancement of minority groups, and the provision of opportunities for all individuals to realize their full potential.

Whether in Cape Town or Salford, the university with its enshrined rituals, customs, respect for debate and status, has the potential to drive the battle for social justice. I have suggested that these processes of institutional transformation can be analysed as the interplay between formal and substantive elements of making meaning, traced as circulating systems of references. But thickening and deepening this understanding of structures, both formal and substantive, at the end of a long swim and a big climb, it is individuals who have to listen and learn and change as part of their university education. This accounts for the slight, but crucial change in the sameness of the repetition of Paul Simon’s ballad:

Once upon a time there was an ocean. But now it’s a mountain range. Something unstoppable set into motion. Nothing is different, but everything’s changed.

I figure that once upon a time I was an ocean. But now I’m a mountain range. Something unstoppable set into motion. Nothing is different, but everything’s changed.

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