

California State University, Monterey Bay



Oral History Interviews

*Digital Proximities*  
*Covid19 and the transformation of pedagogical practices*

Unhealable

Interview with  
Sean Field  
Recorded on May 13, 2020

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Digital Proximities 021 Field

Sean Field

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1 **00:00** [Music]

2 **00:11 Gutiérrez** *Sean, thank you so much for taking the time. I'm sure that if your*  
3 *experience is anything like that of the rest of the planet, it's busier now than before. So, thank*  
4 *you for taking the time. Why don't we start by you letting us know of your context, who you are,*  
5 *your trajectory, and where are you? what part of the planet are you at?*

6 **00:44 Field** Basically, I am a full time academic at the University of Cape Town which  
7 is the oldest university in South Africa. it's regarded as sort of top university in Africa because  
8 of the publications and output. And yeah and I Associate Professor in the Historical Studies  
9 Department, and it's also basically it's a university. I was a student at Cape Town, as the city is  
10 my hometown and I've been involved in various capacities at the University of Cape Town. At  
11 the moment I've got a fairly conventional academic job of teaching and doing research. But  
12 maybe a little bit of a context, you know, to our conversation, is that we are... South Africa is at  
13 a shutdown, like many countries around the world, because of the pandemic.

14 **01:40** But what's been very interesting for me and for a lot of South Africans has been our  
15 recent history, what's just, you know, not just my history, or the university's history, is that South  
16 Africa went through. Is probably the one, or one of the worst affected countries in the world by  
17 HIV/AIDS epidemic. And that has shaped all sort of things in South Africa at stake. In  
18 particular, deals with the corona virus epidemic. And bizarrely, you know, from... and this is just  
19 a quick case you can want to be more follow-up questions, South Africa is just regarded as one

20 of the disastrous cases in the HIV/AIDS pandemic, because the president at the time, Mbeke  
21 after Mandela, was one of the famous AIDS denialists. Then, it was tragic, a real tragedy,  
22 because on other respects he was one of the best presidents we've ever had. But on the pandemic,  
23 he was terrible. he AIDS denialism was disastrous. We still remain one of the... we have the  
24 second highest infection rate for HIV/AIDS in the world. Our population is fifty-nine million  
25 people. a whom eight million are HIV-positive and others eight million HIV-positive largely  
26 because of people had followed him. We have now between four and a half million people on  
27 antiretrovirals.

28 **03:23** So you might say: "Well, what does this got to do with an academic question?" One of  
29 the big questions, not just for me as an academic, but is given the immune-depressant side of the  
30 pandemic, and the immune system is so central to the infectious rate of a virus, one of the big  
31 mysteries. and it remains a mystery, is the fact that there are many people HIV positive. Good or  
32 bad thing: unclear. So certainly, there is a great fear that the people, that are not, this is roughly  
33 three and a half million people, not on antiretrovirals, will they be more exposed? We don't  
34 know, and then maybe a lot of a contextual point is that this is the positive side, is that the state  
35 reacted very quickly. They know, compared to being a disastrous nation state response to the  
36 HIV/AIDS pandemic, this time, this new president, there is a new president who's a very good  
37 president, the state acted very quickly: we shut down very quickly. We are regarded by the  
38 World Health Organization one of the success stories in the developing world. That's the good  
39 news, yeah.

40 **04:46** As of this morning, you know, we only have in terms of official count, eleven thousand  
41 cases of Coronavirus. In reality, actual rate could be two three four times...

42 **05:01 Gutiérrez** *I was looking at the numbers and it is, it's really good it's really good.*

43 **05:09 Field** Very good but we but the main thing, and this is my last contextual point,  
44 we've been told explicitly over the shutdown is done is given the medical services in the state  
45 and at various levels of the state time to prepare because the peak is only going to hit us in  
46 September and you know the daily rate used to be about fifty sixteen hundred people just in the  
47 last five days we now hitting four five hundred new cases per day and it started to pick up they  
48 made when the state is more ready now but then I think the worse is to come we're just at a  
49 different stage.

50 **05:57 Gutiérrez** *Let me take you Sean to talk a little bit more in detail about your*  
51 *university. Is this a large university? What type of students do you have? What is the socio-*  
52 *economic context that you're working with?*

53 **06:16 Field** Yeah. This is the second largest university in the country. I think registered student  
54 population are now about 28,000 students. It's a really expensive university to go to. All  
55 universities are very pricey in South Africa, which changes the class composition of your student  
56 demography. But certainly, in Cape Town, because UCTD, because of reputation it's got lots of  
57 good students. Certainly, and I will stand in correction, but probably about 55 percent of our  
58 students are black, and 45% white. Class demography of those 55 percent black students varies  
59 from faculty to faculty, but one of the key things that occurred over background, consequences  
60 that the universities grappled in fact all South African universities, is so we went down into  
61 quick shutdown mode, all the universities, all the schools as well, but what do you do? And  
62 what...how can I put a long story short?...the long story is, how many students don't have access  
63 to the Internet? Big, big issue. So, we estimate -lots of surveys- and it is ongoing, I mean we  
64 estimate somewhere between 25 to 30 percent of our students don't have Internet access. In other  
65 universities it'll be far worse, and that really has major implications for online teaching. So, at a

66 first graduate level, the university-wide and my personal experiences, it's been fine. It is actually  
67 better than expected. I'm running a great oral history class on line. My students can't go to do  
68 fieldwork, but I can send them to the archives. The graduate classes have access to the Internet,  
69 other than they're not being able to do oral history fieldwork, they got access to on-site with  
70 resources in particularly literature, and archives of the university.

71 **08:44** But undergrad has been, I am going to be blunt, it's been a disaster it's terrible semester  
72 vision undergraduate the best but the mass-based education. And the reality is that, a lot of extra  
73 work, extra documents or basic Whereas in the past you might have done a lecture with a normal  
74 Power Point and you do 45, 50-minute lecture, now, you have to record these lectures and you  
75 have to provide detailed lecture notes. So, it's been a big pedagogic debate about what to do. You  
76 provide, you, and particularly for that 25 percent who can't access to the on-line version, that is  
77 the major issue.

78 **09:28 Gutiérrez** *So, the university is not closed, but... When did they the pandemic hit in*  
79 *Cape Town, Sean, I'm not totally sure?*

80 **09:40 Field** The first infections nationally started in middle of March. In fact our first  
81 infections obviously came from abroad not from China, but from Italy...infecting a lot of  
82 people...

83 **09:53 Gutiérrez** *Is it not a Chinese virus? [Laughs]*

84 **09:55 Field** No, no, definitely not from China, no. Your president is wrong!

85 **09:57** It was a... but obviously we are now in the serious phase now where, I mean, a few of the  
86 initial infections were all travelers actually in March. But now it's the local transmission, as a  
87 middle-class traveler disease, it's a working-class disease. And the state is ready but it's very  
88 hard. It started in March, and it's very slow, and curbed by the quick shutdown. But it has meant,

89 one of the implications, that just not do, any face-to-face teaching. Whether school or university  
90 across the country. We've just, about 10 days ago, the state has relaxed some of the measures,  
91 you know, some of the initial measures were relaxed. But in terms of schooling, university  
92 education, we are not allowed back. I have not been to my office for six weeks and no one else.

93 **11:19 Gutiérrez** *Interesting. So, you are right before the winter break, or in the middle of*  
94 *the semester, it was bad timing, right?*

95 **12:11 Field** Yes. It is right in the middle of our teaching calendar, which is quite  
96 typical for South Africa. The academic year starts in February. Our first semester runs from  
97 February until mid-June. Then we have the winter break, when you have your summer break,  
98 and then from late July until November is our second semester. But it is very clear, very, in all of  
99 the academic difficult discussions is that, initially, obviously a lot of the planning was: What are  
100 we doing for the first semester? What do we do for this semester? It is now clear that what are  
101 we doing at this moment in terms of curricular changes, and pedagogic changes in the first  
102 semester, has to be applicable to the second...there is a small chance that my colleagues will go  
103 back to face to face teaching in October. If all goes well, if we go back in October. But more  
104 likely, I think the more likely scenario is that the normal university face to face teaching will star  
105 tin February next year with the new academic year.

106 **26:09 Gutiérrez** *That is right.*

107 **26:11 Field** And the other question is what that means for our student numbers, I do  
108 not know. It is going to hit us hard. Specially in graduate. We are supposed to be recruiting now  
109 for nest year. It is going to be a real issue.

110 **13:07 Gutiérrez** *Very challenging for everybody. So, some of the things that I... I think we*  
111 *are species that has been successful adapting. So, we are going to have to adapt, no matter what.*

112 *So, of the things that you are witnessing, Sean, and you are making decisions personally and*  
 113 *institutionally. Do you see opportunity here? For your institution, for us all to change our*  
 114 *practices as educators? Do you see opportunity? Do you see mostly challenges? How do you*  
 115 *What is your state of... ánimo, we say in Spanish, or your feelings about it?*

116 **13:48 Field** Look, I think, at the moment, certainly, we are, most academics are, at the  
 117 moment we are, most academics are, I think I am just talking to myself, became to be dominated  
 118 with the negative. But it often does come up the end of a conversation: Isn't there something  
 119 positive?... Certainly societally you find positive. Like there is clearly benefits for the  
 120 environment. Really seeing it. I love it in the middle of a city with a Mediterranean climate its  
 121 quite extraordinary to see the natural environment is benefitting whether the social people  
 122 environment has change for the good, I don't know. Look, I don't know I really don't know, I  
 123 wish, I think I cling -like most academics- hope that it will change how we work. The University  
 124 was already geared in the last few years a lot more towards you know what we historians might  
 125 see as far more human centered, empathic centered start, of all the institutional culture. You  
 126 know, and so, that has certainly been already been the shifts that have been happening in the  
 127 institutional culture. It took quite a while we were ready about 15 years into democracy before  
 128 my university acknowledged it should break from its delusions of being, of working within the  
 129 Oxbridge tradition. I mean that in the most negative senses.

130 **15:36 Gutiérrez** *In the most negative sense!*

131 **15:39 Field** I mean that it in a very pejorative way. But now really the institutions has  
 132 been trying to be far more caring, far more student centered, and so forth. That was partly  
 133 through various political upheavals that we had with students. But what is going to happen  
 134 through this pandemic, I do not know. It is a mystery. I think, it is a good question you are

135 asking. I wish I had a clearer answer. One thing negative is the financial implication. I mean, I  
136 even had students asking early. Never in my life before, Juan, I was asked by students: Is your...  
137 are you going to keep your job? I am a tenured professor, with a permanent job, And never in  
138 my twenty odd years in the job have I been asked. It is a perfectly legitimate question. Is your  
139 job under threat? With teaching online, which any of my colleagues or I are particularly happy  
140 with, is the only way the university can survive financially. If we shut down courses and  
141 reimburse students the university would have had to cut staff because they make a non-academic  
142 staff.

143 **16:55 Gutiérrez** *Exactly. It seems to me that in that boat, where I think we're all. All over*  
144 *the planet, in the same boat. We need to remain -as institutions- not only viable, but relevant.*  
145 *And we're going to be able to reach out and continue being relevant, first, in in particular cases*  
146 *South Africa seems to me that the 25 30 % of students that are still on the other side of the digital*  
147 *divide they're going to have to be reached out, somehow, And then, secondly, maybe our own*  
148 *teaching and internal you feel about it but our own teaching needs to be revisited for its urgency*  
149 *for its relevance for its adaptability to new conditions how do we make history to continue to be*  
150 *what it is a very central component of the experience right when what matters is: Am I going to*  
151 *be able to have a job tomorrow? I'm going to be able to eat? for families and students, right? I*  
152 *was, I've been following in South Africa for the longest time because we're all fans of Mandela -*  
153 *of course- and it's interesting to see the progression. But during the last year's, Sean, South*  
154 *Africa has been sort of having difficulties with coming back together, right? I got a feeling that*  
155 *the the main political party has been facing challenges and so it's a complicated situation I guess*  
156 *that's what I'm saying.*



157 **18:25 Field** Yes. Mandela years was that idealistic getting the democracy here. A lot  
158 of good political new laws were passed. Mbeke was a different kind of good president, other than  
159 his disaster with the pandemic. But the most disastrous President was we call the Zuma years  
160 from 2009 to 2019. It was just a disaster: he's corrupt, a rapist, and he is central thought to what  
161 we call the state captured strategy, when he'll are very big business. I mean there is still ongoing  
162 commissions about this. So there, but the current president, he was a star from the 1990s,  
163 Ramaphosa, he's got his, you know, these issues, but he's a, he's a charismatic figure, that's trying  
164 to pull the party together, to pull society together, and certainly he's opinion rates I mean he's  
165 been very smart in how he has thought for the pandemic, but worried one of the worries that as  
166 on hold is the What does this means politically? It's when the pandemic really, it's a its peak, you  
167 know, over September/October. How that's going to... what's going to happen for the party? And  
168 because the reality of the working class is going to be badly affected yeah, I mean I know your  
169 inflation rate, your unemployment rate has climbed, but South Africa before the pendant official  
170 misses an official card which is always too low our official unemployment rate was 28 percent.  
171 For years it has been one of these economies that stagnate. It doesn't go into complete recession  
172 and another and boom and we have been on in stagnation for five years. But now, I mean you  
173 know, we, before the pandemic, we were predicted by the Reserve Bank and the Treasury  
174 predicted we will be lucky if we get between 0.5% and 1% growth to the coming now the rating  
175 the prediction is retraction of 6%. So, you can imagine what's going to happen to the  
176 unemployment rate. Our unemployment rate can hit the 40 percents and how that is going to play  
177 out politically for even the best president we have had for a long time. I do not know.

178 **20:52 Gutiérrez** *Yes, it is a big problem. A bleak prospect but here we are. As educators we*  
179 *need to bring knowledge and hope for the students, what else can we do? Right? Well Sean, I*

180 *need to keep these clips a little short otherwise we'll lose, you know, the audience. But I want to*  
 181 *wish you the best and in solidarity from the northern part of the planet. I'm really hoping that*  
 182 *that this will turn out not to be that difficult for South Africa as it's being for other nations.*  
 183 *Hopefully because of that what you were saying that it is a nation because of its experience with*  
 184 *prior pandemics aids and what not was in a better disposition to cope with the challenges that*  
 185 *you're facing up Argentina happens to be an interesting case similar to South Africa Nelson's*  
 186 *there Argentina has a bad press but they the mechanisms of solidarity in mutualism just kicked in*  
 187 *in a really interesting way so on each nation has its strengths and challenges definitely*

188 **22:16 Field** Can I lead you with this point which I wanted to conclude with is that so  
 189 I'm very lucky that on the first of July I go on sabbatical. But the book that I'm busy writing  
 190 which I've been planning for the doing some research on a lot of reading for the last three four  
 191 years. Is, it's not a medical history, I'm not a medical historian. But I mean to assess with  
 192 questions about psychic trauma crying out of being a lot of work on violence and getting and  
 193 doing a lot of teaching on the debates around trauma theory you know but I... what the end of  
 194 last year many see pull my overall idea for the book together, and I've been just busy writing the  
 195 book proposal for AUP press and then the pandemic breaks but... yes here's what keeps me  
 196 awake: I can't work out I'm going to tell you. And ask for your advice: whether this book is now  
 197 pointless give it its focus, or it's going to be a best-seller because this conflict?

198 **23:32 Gutiérrez** *I'm thinking about the latter.*

199 **23:34 Field** But listen, this is what the focus of the book is. It's about part of the  
 200 argument of the book. I'm not a monographer and I write these essays and then I try to mold  
 201 them into the monograph...it's about the dimensions of psychic trauma which can be caused by

202 political violence, natural disasters, a pandemic like this etc., right but how the dimensions of  
203 psychic trauma that are unhealable. That is the title of the book the unhealable.

204 **24:05 Gutiérrez** *The unhealable.*

205 **24:06 Field** And yeah, this pandemic starts. I think I said to my boss, he is a brilliant  
206 theorist, Is there any point of doing this book? He said: “No, there is never been greater reason to  
207 write this book. Now.” Yeah. I don't know. What do you think?

208 **24:26 Gutiérrez** *You know, I think it's very important that we realize that the unhealable*  
209 *part is that we're never going to go back to where we were before this pandemic. That we depend*  
210 *on systems that are so feeble, so fragile, that it is time to recognize that; And to move away from*  
211 *systems that are really gone, beyond the craziness of all the years. That we have decades that we*  
212 *have lived in a neoliberal dream, that is untenable. So, it's the planet telling us: “That's it.” This*  
213 *is the end of that world but we need to create another world so maybe it's a good thing that is*  
214 *unhealable. Maybe it is a good thing. So, I hope you finish the book because it's going to be*  
215 *needed. So, I come I have to see that coming soon again as I said we could be talking for we*  
216 *know more than an hour I'm gonna have to call it an end for this particular conversation now*  
217 *but thank you for your time best wishes to you to your students to institution and I'm really glad*  
218 *that you having a sabbatical to have time to reflect we need those minds reflecting.*

219 **25:45 Field** Thanks very much.

220 **25:50** [Music]