Rethinking the “Idea of the University” Through Pandemic-Era Student Experiences

Amber Rose Caine
2410322
Faculty of Humanities
University of the Witwatersrand

Supervisor: Prof. Julia Hornberger

Plagiarism Declaration

I, Amber Rose Caine, hereby declare that this research report is my own original work and it has not been submitted before to any institution for assessment. I received ethical clearance (Protocol Number: ANTH2022/04/02) before embarking on my research.

I have acknowledged and referenced all sources used and have cited these in my reference list.

Date: 9 March, 2023

Signature:

Acknowledgements

To begin, I'd like to express my deep gratitude for the participants that made this research report possible. I truly appreciate the time you took to engage with this subject matter and your willingness to reflect on and share your personal experiences; I have learnt so much from you all. Thank you to my supervisor, Prof. Julia Hornberger, for your invaluable, thoughtful feedback and for always pushing me to rethink, rework, and dig deeper. Thank you to my brilliant classmates, for your encouragement and, at times, collective commiseration, it made all the difference. Lastly, thank you to my husband, for being my sounding board, proofreader, and source of endless support. Discussions about our undergraduate university experiences, both separate and together, and how they influenced our identities and subsequent lives, sparked my interest in this topic and led to an incredibly rewarding research project.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements *3*

Abstract *6*

Chapter 1: Introduction *7*

1.1 Introduction 7

1.2 Literature Review 8

Infrastructure 8

Sociality 12

The Idea of the University 14

1.3 Methodology & Ethical Considerations 19

1.4 Chapter Outline 23

Chapter 2 - The University, Imagined & Encountered *26*

2.1 Introduction 26

2.2 Infrastructure & the Campus 27

2.3 Sociality & Communitas 32

2.4 The Idea of the University as a liminal Space 35

2.5 Conclusion 36

Chapter 3 – Return Home *38*

3.1 Introduction 38

3.2 Infrastructure & “Home” Spaces 39

3.3 Sociality & Incidental Biosociality 43

3.4 The Idea of the University as Remote 46

3.5 Conclusion 47

Chapter 4 – Near & Far...*49*

4.1 Introduction 49

4.2 Infrastructure & Distanced Learning 50

4.3 Sociality & the Return to Residences 54

4.4 The Idea of the University as Static 58

4.5 Conclusion 60

Chapter 5: The Return *62*

5.1 Introduction 62

5.2 Infrastructure & the Classroom 63

5.3 Sociality & the Collective Experience 67

5.4 The Idea of the University as Interpersonal 72

5.5 Conclusion 73

Chapter 6 - Conclusion...*74*

Reference List *79*

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the upheaval of "the university", as we knew it, and a repositioning of higher education online. By mid-2022, third-year anthropology students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) had experienced two years of online education, followed by a return to select in-person classes under the banner of "blended learning". My research centred on in-depth interviews with fourteen students in order to grapple with, and learn from, this cohorts' unique "university experience".

As the "Idea of the University", conceptualised in academic texts, often contains lofty notions for an imagined future, I chose to retrospectively highlight "the university" as it was experienced, from early 2020 until mid-2022. Grounded in student narratives, I describe the pre-pandemic Liminal University; the Remote University as distance learning commenced and progressed; the Static University as education continued for a second year online; and the Interpersonal University as students returned to on-campus classes.

I found that through destabilisation, the key elements that made an all-encompassing university education possible, came into focus – namely, campus infrastructure and student sociality. Despite the university's dispersal of data and loan devices, students' home environments could not mirror the layered infrastructure nor social connection that had shaped pre-pandemic university education. Yet, upon students' return to the physical campus in 2022, small, in-person classes where discussion was facilitated led students to re-engage with their course material, educators, and each other. As such, I argue that the *full* university education, that students both desired and benefited from, requires robust on-campus infrastructure for living and learning, and facilitated in-person engagement.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a previously unimaginable disruption to higher education. Lecturers and learners were thrown into remote education, which involved unfamiliar online platforms and new modes of teaching and learning (Sá 2020). For almost two years, South African universities were situated online, and for many undergraduates a portion of their lectures and tutorials remained online in 2022, under the banner of "blended learning". As the transplantation of university education from brick and mortar to virtual spaces was reactive – a response to a crisis – administrators and educators had little time to grapple with possible long-term consequences (Le Grange 2020). Considering this, my research focused on a group that was acutely affected by this shift: students who began their undergraduate education in 2020 and only experienced a brief period of in-person classes before being repositioned online, indefinitely. Within this cohort, I centred on anthropology students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), due – in part – to anthropology's traditional emphasis on in-person experiences, and its positioning within the humanities. This focus on the humanities is purposeful, as the humanities have generally celebrated the "university experience" as a whole, providing students with critical thinking skills rather than "vocational training" (Pillay & Yu 2010; Costa 2019).

As the "idea of the university" is often conceptualised by educators rather than learners, I provide a perspective that is grounded in students' lived experiences. I suggest that through the student population's fragmentation during the pandemic, important elements of something quite abstract and immaterial, the "university experience", were made visible. I found that university infrastructure and sociality scaffold the student experience, as such, they are used as overarching themes throughout my work. Their importance was emphasised, both through their presence and absence, over the course of these particular anthropology students' undergraduate education. By infrastructure I refer to the intersecting resources that facilitate a university experience. This includes – but is not limited to – the physical campus space and the virtual realm of online learning, from libraries, internet connection, computer labs and lecture halls, to student residences, class structures, and social spaces. By sociality, I speak of students' social worlds – engagement with friends, classmates, educators and strangers.

Through reflecting on infrastructure and sociality, and how they interact, I outline the "idea of the university" that presents itself at different moments in time, from early 2020 until mid-2022, in each of my ethnographic chapters.

As COVID-19 falls out of focus in light of current global events, I suggest that pandemic-era experiences still hold important insights that have present and future relevance. Through student reflections during the upheaval and refiguring of university education, we can determine the aspects of traditional university education and online interpretations of teaching and learning that are genuinely effective. As, in a post-pandemic world, universities are changing in real-time, it is important to reflect upon and re-evaluate taken-for-granted notions of what a university education *is* or needs to be (Sá 2020). The pandemic gave us the rare opportunity to see what transpires when the university is disassembled, to take note of what becomes visible upon breakdown (Star 1999; Latham & Layton 2019). With this considered, I endeavoured to do exactly that, to "bear witness" and learn from an exceptionally strange moment in time that is rapidly becoming a distant memory.

1.2 Literature Review

In this literature review, I acknowledge the research and perspectives that have shaped my approach and framed my findings. Mirroring the structure of each of my ethnographic chapters, it is organised into three broad themes: *Infrastructure*; *Sociality*; and *the Idea of the University*. Considering that these subjects have long histories, with tendrils that climb in several directions, I have privileged literature that connects to South African realities and the field of anthropology.

Infrastructure

Throughout this text, I use the term "Infrastructure" with broad strokes, referring to physical resources at times, and more intangible properties at others. I make this clarification, as Klinenberg suggests, "the term infrastructure usually evokes imagery of hard infrastructure, physical infrastructure involved in large scale systems of transit, water, food, finance, and electricity" (2018, 15). In contrast, the literature I've included shows that "infrastructure" can be understood in myriad ways and works as a useful conceptual tool to understand both on-campus and online structures that both encourage and hinder activity.

Star (1999, 379) highlights that infrastructure is "by definition invisible, part of the background for other kinds of work". It facilitates certain action but only becomes visible upon breakdown. This notion of visibility upon breakdown has direct links to the pandemic-era university. As the physical campus was abandoned, the layered strata of infrastructure that made the university experience possible, became evident. Larkin (2013) expresses that infrastructure's invisibility is only one side of a scale that reaches hyper visibility at its alternate end. Yet, he explains that the infrastructure behind a particular action is not always easy to pinpoint. Underlying infrastructure is complex, it involves "disparate elements" that collectively create different possibilities for human action (Larkin 2013, 328). Goodyear (2021, 42) suggests that "definitions of infrastructure tend towards the relational, such that some would argue that the defining question is not *what* is infrastructure, but *when* is infrastructure: in the sense that infrastructure is drawn together for particular purposes and activities". This conceptualisation relates back to the amalgamation of infrastructure, both overt and covert, that makes up a university campus and facilitates specific experiences.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, infrastructure became a key challenge for South African universities as students left the physical campus and dispersed to different home settings with varied resources. Fouché & Andrews (2022) propose that the move to online learning exacerbated inequalities between South African university students. They posit that, despite South African universities' interventions and resource distribution, the pandemic "put tremendous pressure on our most vulnerable students", often rendering them "faceless and voiceless, while inducing unprecedented anxiety" (Fouché & Andrews 2022, 154). Czerniewicz et al. (2020, 949), suggests that "in a certain sense, the pandemic, and the pivoting to online made visible, the invisible, or ignored manifestations and mechanisms of inequality". Trivedi (2021, 130) similarly explains that although the pandemic exacerbated inequality and university students' and instructors' anxieties, these challenges have always existed, and need to be taken seriously as we "return" to in-person university life. Trivedi (2021, 136) stresses the importance of keeping classrooms “accessible for a wide range of students in a diverse set of circumstances and recoveries” as we transition back to university campuses.

The loss of university infrastructure, which had a serious effect on students’ lives, also includes “social infrastructure” (Klinenberg 2018; Latham & Layton 2019). Klinenberg’s notion of “social infrastructure” suggests that infrastructure has important social functions (2018, 786). He suggests that “too often we take for granted and neglect our libraries, parks, markets, schools, playgrounds and communal spaces, but decades of research now show that these places can have an extraordinary effect on our personal and collective wellbeing” (Klinenberg 2018, 786). Latham & Layton (2019, 3) build upon Klinenberg’s concept of social infrastructure, describing it as “the networks of spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups that create affordances for social connection”. From this definition, the university campus which hosts thousands of students and staff members, contains intricate webs of social infrastructure that enable all kinds of encounters and opportunities for connection.

The infrastructure of online learning includes practical considerations like WIFI, electronic devices, and physical spaces that are conducive for learning. It also relates to online class design and structure (Bielaczyc 2006). Bielaczyc (2006, 303) suggests that effective online learning requires more than resource access; to “gain a deeper understanding of how to create successful learning environments with technology-based tools, the design process needs to extend beyond the tool itself to include the design of social infrastructure”. Both online and in-person teaching and learning requires infrastructure that facilitates student engagement and interaction (Bielaczyc 2006). As Goodyear (2021 51) argues, “well-chosen tools and well-managed spaces can help us all hear the articulation of diverse needs, skills and aspirations”. He notes that infrastructure “needs to be considered from at least two perspectives, or within dual ontologies: as (i) a set of objects to be designed, planned and managed and (ii) as entangled and experienced in real activities” (Goodyear 2021, 42). An awareness of both “the planned and the experienced” is vital within educational environments, as the intentions for specific infrastructure often differ from their use (Goodyear 2021 42).

Online education materialised during the 1990s and although technological advances have resulted in considerable changes to its modes and methods, certain early insights remain relevant. Bullen (1998) suggests that online teaching and learning must focus on increasing dialogue and active involvement to keep students engaged and learning. He reflects that "although the technology may have attributes that have the potential to facilitate a dynamic and interactive educational experience, making this happen depends on much more than the technology" (Bullen 1998, 28). Through the use of creative teaching practices, Erasmus (2021) demonstrates that teachers and students can create a certain level of intimacy and engagement while physically apart. Through incorporating the practice of letter writing into her course, she explains that "because of our letters, neither students nor teachers were faceless, heartless, or placeless" (Erasmus 2021, 133). The practice of letter writing, from her perspective, created an opportunity for communication between teachers and students to be "embodied, affective and located" (Erasmus 2021, 133). This demonstrates that although an engaged student experience is plausible within online spaces, it does require creativity and reflexivity from educators and facilitators.

Carse and Kneas (2019, 9) explain that "infrastructures" are "useful focal points for understanding social phenomena". They develop the concept of "suspended presents", which usually focuses on unfinished or incomplete infrastructure and its social effects, the experience of waiting, indefinitely, for an imagined future. They explain "suspension" as "not a state of being but rather a social process associated with distinct temporal frames, rhythms, and conditions of possibility" (Carse & Kneas 2019, 18). In this context, "infrastructures can become 'promissory notes' that prompt people to imagine a future world and their place in it" (Anand et al. 2018; Hetherington 2014; MacLean 2017 in Carse & Kneas 2019, 18). Although, in students' realities the infrastructure of the university campus was withheld, not suspended in the process of creation, this concept remains relevant. The university campus and infrastructure represented an imagined future, the "full" university experience that was postponed, and became increasingly unlikely due to the prolonged, uncertain nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although "Infrastructure is commonly understood in physical terms, as reticulated systems of highways, pipes, wires, or cables", Simone (2004, 407) extends the term to include people. He explains that "African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used"

(Simone 2004, 407). He shows that people not do not simply occupy the city, they are the city's "cocreators", a part of the city's infrastructure and resources (Simone 2004). A similar understanding of infrastructure could be applied to a university campus, where needs are met, and experiences shaped by an assortment of individuals and groups. In this sense, infrastructure is made up of people and place, physical resources and intangible properties, planned provisions and unintentional outcomes.

Sociality

The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching consequences for human sociality. Restrictions to physical human contact drastically changed how we moved through the world, communicated and connected with one another (Fuentes 2020, 24). Our ecosystem as Homo sapiens, Fuentes (2020, 24) explains, is social through and through. He elaborates, stating "countless experiments and lived experiences demonstrate that removing these daily immersions in social activity cause bodily infrastructures of mental and physical health to falter" (Fuentes 2020, 24). For university students, who were plucked out of an intrinsically social world only to "return" years later, pandemic-induced changes to sociality had unique implications.

For first-year students, sociality is a key part of their transition into a new chapter of their lives. The shift from high school to university "not only involves academic transitions in terms of new educational demands, but also involves personal, social and lifestyle transitions" (Maunder et al. 2013, 140). This time of change can be seen as a liminal phase, a period for transformation. Beech et al. (2011, 288) explain that "liminality can be understood in the anthropological sense to be a temporary transition through which identity is reconstructed", a process that is heavily influenced by those around us. Buechner et al. (2020, 23) posit that the liminal phase encourages "a shared feeling called communitas", a sense of collective experience and community. Cooper (2009) demonstrates the importance of student sociality to their overall well-being and academic endurance. He explains that "the feeling that they are cared about and seen as part of the campus community is tied to students' sense of belonging; this feeling in turn is tied to student persistence" (Cooper 2009, 1). Cooper (2009,

7) argues that “a significant factor associated with student persistence is the level of engagement of students with their college or university community outside of classes”, this engagement can range from sporting and cultural organisations to study groups and social activities, many of which were restricted during the pandemic.

The pandemic resulted in a return to immediate family and long term friendships (Gallegos, Zaring-Hinkle & Bray 2022); primordial relationships that, although intimate, do not encourage the same kind of personal change or growth that navigating a new social environment as a “stranger” allows (Simmel 2004). Simmel’s (2004) concept of “the stranger” shows that there are benefits to inhabiting an environment as an outsider without a long, tangled social history. University students, especially undergraduates, could be considered “strangers” in Simmel’s sense of the word. Students bring unique traits and perspectives from their varied backgrounds to “trade” through social and academic engagement, they are not “organically connected” to the university environment and those they share it with, and their presence on campus is transient (Simmel 2004, 2). Simmel (2004, 2) explains that this “objectivity” allows freedom to engage with different kinds of individuals, and to interact openly, in a manner that is not always possible with “closely related persons”.

Sandstrom & Dunn (2013, 2) assert that “psychologically speaking, social relationships are a necessity, not a luxury”. She shows that “supportive social relationships do not only reduce emotional distress - they also increase emotional well-being” (Sandstrom & Dunn 2013, 3). The benefits of sociality are not limited to intimate relationships; Sandstrom & Dunn (2013) suggest that “weak ties”, which are less familiar than our core relationships, are also important. Observing students in a university setting, Sandstrom & Dunn (2013, 2) found that “during classes when they had more interactions with weak tie classmates than usual, they were happier”. Beyond loose connections and acquaintances, Sandstrom & Dunn (2013, 10) asserts, “there is evidence that interactions with strangers, which are even less intimate than those with weak ties, lead to greater subjective well-being”. As the physical campus space typically provides opportunities for engagement with varying levels of intimacy, Sandstrom & Dunn’s argument demonstrates the sheer scale of the pandemic’s disruption to students’ social eco-systems.

Rabinow (2007) proposed the concept of “biosociality” in the early 1990s. At the time, the term related to an imagined future where social groups form around shared biological features, such as a specific genetic variation (Rabinow 2007). Despite this initial specificity, he explains that biosociality was never meant to be used as “an epochal term” (Rabinow 2007, 192). Rather, he encourages others to apply the concept to modern concerns as they arise (Rabinow 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic is one such moment when “biosociality”, as a malleable term, is applicable. Bradley (2021, 543) expresses that “anthropological accounts of biosociality reveal the importance of social relations formed through shared biological conditions”. Biosociality commonly refers to patient communities, as Bradley (2021, 543) states, “after diagnosis, the powerful moment of discovering ‘you are not alone’ can lead to immense personal transformations”. That said, “biosocial groups do not simply exist, they must be formed and found and their sustainability requires ongoing work and care from biosocial actors themselves” (Bradley 2021, 543). This speaks to how the COVID-19 pandemic worked as a catalyst for connection, predominantly online, but that these relationships still required active investment to survive.

Changes to social dynamics as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic also include interaction between students and their educators. During the pandemic, as South African students faced numerous hurdles, Vandeyar (2021, 6) states that “academics seemed to be acknowledging students’ humanity before their academic achievements”. Vandeyar (2021, 9) suggests that educators engaged in a higher level of care and understanding that was not offered and/or expected from academics prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift towards “compassionate pedagogy” during the pandemic shows how COVID-19 affected university sociality in unexpected ways (Waddington 2021). Yet, as Waddington (2021, 6) explains, “you cannot have compassion without some form of interpersonal engagement”, which was not always possible within the conditions of online learning.

The Idea of the University

As the “Idea of the University” has been envisioned, debated, and reimagined across a vast range of texts (Barnett 2011a, 3), this specific collection of literature includes commonly held interpretations of "the university" that relate to the University of the Witwatersrand. Considering South Africa's colonial past, the foundations of local universities were determined by historic Western notions of university education. Similarly, Apartheid shaped the University of the Witwatersrand, through the university's compliance, and its resistance. In recent years, the "Fallist" movement, along with decolonisation, transformation, and reform efforts, have moulded the present-day University of the Witwatersrand that students experience. As these influences, among countless others, amalgamate to create the university that students inhabit, they provide an important frame for understanding the present-day student experience.

Certain historic conceptualisations of the university inform how universities are structured and perceived. The Humboldtian tradition, which suggests a university education cultivates both the mind and character, still holds weight in many institutions of higher education (Nybom 2003). Nybom (2003, 144) suggests that the Humboldtian tradition's advocation for "the unity of research and education/teaching" and "the holistic nature of knowledge" remains relevant, 200 years after the publication of Wilhelm von Humboldt's seminal work. Similarly, Newman's vision for tertiary education in *The Idea of the University,* originally published in 1852, is discernible in many contemporary university manifestos (Lanford 2019). In particular, the argument for interdisciplinary knowledge and liberal education "that prizes the development of individual intellect" rather than "narrowly-defined skill development", lives on (Lanford 2019, 3). In my report, I have borrowed from the title of Newman's text, "*The Idea of the University"*, to think through how the university is structured and what it represents. Yet, instead of viewing *the "Idea of the University",* as a fixed ideal for an imagined future, I use the concept to reflect upon the different versions of "the university" that students experience in their day-to-day lives.

Barnett's (2011a) history of the university – organised into: the "metaphysical university", the "research university", the "entrepreneurial university", and the proposed future "ecological university" – provides a summation of broad trends in higher education. As these versions of the university have varying influence, and tend to overlap in different configurations, Barnett's (2011a) work can be used to understand the University of the Witwatersrand at present. Wits inherited certain structures and teaching formats from "the metaphysical university", the first iteration of the modern university, which was based on religious education and connection to a transcendental realm (Barnett 2011a). Although the purpose of the university has shifted, disconnecting from religious ideology over time, the idea of the university as a space for in-depth knowledge acquisition and philosophical discussions about human existence, has held steady. At present, "the research university" is pertinent to the University of the Witwatersrand's self-image and purpose. In the past, the research university "gave rise to such popular epithets as 'ivory tower', 'knowledge for its own sake' and (even) 'academic freedom'"(Barnett 2011a, 442). In recent years, the "research university" has taken on a "financial edge" due to a global decline in governmental funding (Barnett 2011a, 442), leading to the currently trending "entrepreneurial university", which engages in partnerships with corporate entities (Barnett 2011a). These occasionally conflicting notions of university education that Wits maintains, provide a backdrop for understanding the university at present.

The history of the University of the Witwatersrand, and its "status as an 'open' and 'liberal' university was never uncomplicated" (Murray 1997, 6). Wits, a white, English-language university from its inception up until apartheid's demise in 1994, was considered an "open" university, admitting students from different racial groups to varying degrees at different points in its history. That said, while the only two "open" white universities, the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town, technically admitted a limited number of black students, "it was never part of their policy to grant full equality" (Murray 1997, 650). Murray (1997, 650) suggests that with a complicated application process, severely limited approval, and the problematic implementation of "academic non-segregation but social segregation" – not to mention a whole host of other barriers to entry – Wits was only ever "half open" to black students. Yet, "after the Nationalist accession to power in 1948" and the "Extension of University Education Act" in 1959 that essentially closed black student admittance to white universities, Wits continuously fought to remain "open", despite governmental and societal pushback (Murray 1997, 649). Phillips (2000, 174) explains that the university's apparent contradictions positioned Wits as "a bastion of liberal values and a self-serving tool of capitalism and racism, depending on the eye of the beholder".

Within the broader African context, in the 1960s Nyerere (1968) argued that knowledge acquisition needs to result in application, as he believed that education should meet the needs of a nation (Nyerere 1968). Mamdani (1993, 19) echoed this sentiment, calling for a move towards research and university education that is locally relevant, encouraging us to ask, "who should centres of research and learning serve, and how?”. Hoppers (2002); Seepe (2001); and Lumumba-Kasongo (2000), among many others advocated for an “African Renaissance” in higher education, a shift away from Eurocentric concerns toward local challenges and knowledge production (Higgs 2016). The “idea of the university” at the University of the Witwatersrand at present, involves ongoing transformation and decolonisation (Mbembe 2016). Mbembe (2016, 30) envisioned higher education as a space for students to “develop their own intellectual and moral lives as independent individuals”, to “make systematic forays beyond our current knowledge horizons”. He asks if the “business principles” employed by modern universities subvert this goal, stating that “to decolonize implies breaking the cycle that tends to turn students into customers and consumers” (Mbembe 2016, 31). This conflict is still present within the University of the Witwatersrand, where capitalist notions of university education and more liberal perspectives are often at odds.

Discussions about contemporary “university reform” illuminate the undercurrents affecting modern universities, including Wits (Santos 2021). Santos (2021) expresses that the relationship between society and knowledge production has fundamentally changed. As university education is no longer positioned as a vitally important “public good”, government funding has dried up in public higher education in multiple locations across the globe (Santos 2021). This transition has forced universities to compete in the public sector, which has changed how these educational institutions are able to operate (Santos 2021). Malabela (2017, 132) highlights that, prior to the Fees Must Fall movement, the decline in government funding had real consequences, “the portion of funding universities receive from government has declined from 49% to 40% over the course of the past decade, while student fees have risen from 24% to 31% in order to cover the shortfall”. This reality led to increasing frustration among students, which fuelled – in part – the “Fees Must Fall” movement.

Five years before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted higher education in South Africa, the “Fees Must Fall” movement prompted its own refiguring of local university education (Seabi 2014). Grappling with the “Fees Must Fall”, or “Fallist”, student movement is essential when attempting to understand the University of the Witwatersrand at present. The “Fallist” movement focused not only on fees and financial exclusion but also on decolonising the curriculum. Malabela (2017, 139) demonstrates that university the “curriculum was alienating to black students as it didn’t include the African experience and was more about the Western or European experience". The "Fallist" movement also reignited discussions about belonging, highlighting that black students should be able to claim the university space as their own, without apology or alteration to meet a white "ideal" (Godsell, Chikane & Mpofu-Walsh 2016; Malabela 2017).

Mangcu (2017) reflected that South African universities were in a place of "crisis" and "opportunity", and that their future trajectory remained uncertain. Godsell, Chikane & Mpofu-Walsh (2016) speak of the student conscientization that took place during the "Fees Must Fall" protests, primarily in relation to systemic racism, neoliberal policies, and the material and structural remnants of colonialism in South African universities. Although transformation does not happen overnight, and unforeseen consequences may arise when change occurs, the "Fees Must Fall" movement challenged existing university structures effectively. Freire's (2020) notion that a greater level of consciousness leads students to resist oppression, and hooks' (2014) emphasis on the educator's role and the importance of teaching students to "transgress", feeds into this discussion about the purpose and influence of higher education in present-day South Africa.

As my research found that "infrastructure" and "sociality" shape the "the university" that students inhabit, my literature review foregrounded these three themes, resulting in an eclectic collection of literature that informs my understanding and use of each term. To begin, the literature I employed demonstrated that "infrastructure" is a dynamic concept. This encouraged my fluid use of the term in reference to the physical and intangible resources that make university education – in the broadest sense of the word – possible. Next, my collection of theory on "sociality" – weak ties (Sandstrom & Dunn 2014), primordial relationships and everything in-between – asserted the importance of student sociality, human connection on a larger scale, and the social fusions and ruptures created by the COVID-19 pandemic. This set of literature established why sociality is a key consideration when grappling with the "idea of the university" from students' perspectives and lived experiences. Finally, I engaged with literature that speaks to the University of the Witwatersrand's complex history, to better understand its current landscape. The university, as an institution originally designed for a different era and student population (Murray 1997; Phillips 2000); as a site for personal and collective consciousness raising (hooks 2014; Freire 2020); as a centre for knowledge production in an ongoing state of transformation

(Mbembe 2016; Higgs 2016), and as a business with financial interests (Santos 2021; Malabela 2017), all influence the student experience. Together, this amalgamation of research and ideas lays the foundation for this research report and works in conversation with my key findings and insights.

1.3 Methodology & Ethical Considerations

My research centred on students' personal narratives about their university experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. As I intended to record an oral history, student interviews formed the foundation of my methodology. That said, students' accounts were not left unexamined. My process of research and analysis involved unpacking how students retrospectively structured their lives and memories. I noted the "images and the symbols" that were used to "express feelings about their experiences and give them meaning" (Yow 2014, 13). Observing what students choose to highlight as well as what they chose to omit, how they framed events, and what subjects proved most emotive, led to greater understanding.

I began my methodological process by formally approaching students through a brief presentation of my research proposal in Professor Hornberger's third-year anthropology class, in June, 2022. Those who were interested in taking part, shared their student email addresses. After a short email exchange over the following weeks, I set up interviews with 14 third-year anthropology students and 2 post-graduate anthropology students who work as undergraduate tutors. These interviews took place over Microsoft Teams video calls, WhatsApp voice calls, WhatsApp voice notes, and WhatsApp messages. In addition, I interviewed the University of the Witwatersrand's Dean of Student Affairs, over a Microsoft Teams video call. For each interview, the participant chose the time, date, and mode of communication they were most comfortable with.

Markham (2014, 434) suggests "a practice of reflexive methodological analysis allows for more resonant and adaptive fieldwork suitable for studying 21st century networked communication practices and cultural formations". With this in mind, I chose to include WhatsApp voice notes as an option for student interviews as they proved an effective mode of communication during my Honours research. As my Honours research involved busy mothers of young children, they preferred to answer questions late at night or in the early hours of the morning. This resulted in thoughtful answers and a certain unexpected intimacy. Similarly, student participants who selected voice note interviews enjoyed the freedom to respond in their own time and tended to share their thoughts with less reserve. At times, these voice notes seemed to flow as a stream of consciousness. My influence as an interviewer felt less pronounced, as the participants could not read my reactions and adapt their responses, consciously or otherwise. Unfortunately, when this took place asynchronously I could not adjust my questions in reaction to their responses. I sent the full set of questions upfront and students found pockets of time and moments of privacy to respond. This hindered the interview process in certain instances, but as students were open to follow up questions and provided clarification when needed, this was easily remedied.

The group of participants I interviewed were majority female, with only one male participant. As, through observation, the anthropology department has significantly more female students and tutors than male students and tutors, this was reflected in the participants' demographic make-up. Within this cluster of third-year students, ten of my participants identified as black and female, two participants as Indian and female, one participant as white and female, and one participant as black and male. The postgraduate students I interviewed were both white and female. The racial demographics of the students involved did not diverge too significantly from the University of the Witwatersrand as a whole. In 2021, the student population was 61.89% African (black), 13.92% white, 11.25% Indian, 3.90% coloured, 0.30% Chinese, and 8.74% international (race unspecified) (University of the Witwatersrand 2022). The participants came from different socio-economic backgrounds and lived in varied present-day home spaces, for instance: at home (with family); in a university residence; or in off-campus accommodation.

My methodology included the collection and analysis of documents relating to the University of the Witwatersrand's COVID-19 teaching and learning strategy, Wits correspondence with the student population, and the university's mission statement and vision. I primarily gathered information from my student email account; online teaching and communication platforms like ulwazi; and the University of the Witwatersrand's website. With this compilation, I constructed a timeline of the university's approach to teaching and learning and its adoption of different interventions over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. This structured my research findings, providing context for student experiences at different moments in time.

During the interview process, participants reflected back on the past. Their narratives, in all likelihood, were influenced by the present, as individual subjectivity and the flaws of human memory are unavoidable when recording oral accounts (Yow 2014, 15). By accepting this as an inevitability, understanding the creativity within personal narratives, I aimed to unravel the subtext beneath what was being said (Yow 2014, 15). In her memoir, Bone Black, hooks (1997) demonstrates that memory is innately subjective. She suggests that the intangible aspects of our past – dreams, feelings, and our imagination – can shape us in fundamental ways and should be taken seriously. Following a similar line of thought, Gqola (2010) uses Pennington's (1985) concept of memory as a "helix", and Morrison's (1987) idea of "rememory", to explain the complexity of remembering and forgetting, and how they both impact our present. How we remember the past is a creative endeavour that can take us in multiple different directions, which has real consequences for our understanding of ourselves and the world around us (Gqola 2010). Portelli (2010) demonstrates that something may be factually "false", yet psychologically "true", that "error" may reveal where "imagination", "symbolism", and "desire" have broken in (2010, 72). While analysing students' stories, I found that it was important to ask how inaccuracies, hyperbole, and bias may have arisen, and how they possibly serve a particular self-narrative (Yow 2014, 22).

After interviews and data collection, I engaged in analysis, which involved "coding, sorting, local integration, and inclusive integration" (Weiss 1995, 154). As Weiss (1995, 154) explains, these processes are not fixed in linearity, as "all analytic processes occur throughout the analysis". The aim of coding is not to make sense of every "meaning unit", rather it involves working through the research material and determining moments of interest, important questions, and reoccurring experiences/themes. Sorting encompasses the organisation of relevant material into different categories and collections. From here, local integration involves interpretation, finding the "main line" of the material, as well as significant variants, which could become "mini theories" after being verified through other examples. From there, "inclusive integration knits into a single coherent story the otherwise isolated areas of analysis that results from local integration" (Weiss 1995, 157).

In relation to ethical considerations, I anticipated that questions pertaining to the difficult nature of the COVID-19 pandemic might be uncomfortable for students to answer. I approached certain topics delicately, pausing the interview if a participant appeared uncomfortable when a sensitive topic was broached. This did not often occur, but in certain instances when students did refer to mental health struggles during the pandemic – often prolonged loneliness, despondency, and anxiety – I made it a priority to check in about how they were coping at present, either within, before the end of the call or after the final voice note/message. When the conversation transitioned towards mental health and student support, students demonstrated an awareness of the CCDU (Counselling and Careers Development Unit) and their options. In interviews via voice and video call I tried to make the interviewees feel as comfortable as possible through patience, sensitivity, and reassurance. In addition, as Yow (2014, 51) suggests, "a place comfortable for the narrator during the interview is essential". With this noted, students guided when the interview would take place, so that they could find a quiet, private space to have a conversation or record voice notes.

As I began my post-graduate studies at the University of the Witwatersrand within the anthropology department in 2020, I also experienced the shift from a brief in-person encounter with the university, to two years of remote learning, followed by a return back to campus in 2022. I had planned to contribute this perspective through autoethnography, reflecting on and writing about my personal experience moving through online and in-person university spaces as a student and tutor. However, while writing my research report I realised that this would distract from the students' perspectives and their unique set of circumstances. That said, I am decidedly present within this work. I acknowledge my influence as interviewer, researcher, and writer, as no "researcher can be a completely neutral, detached observer" (Emerson et al. 2011, 4). I have placed myself within my writing, as Ghodsee (2016, 9) argues, "the first-person "I" acts as an invitation to the reader, exposing the human being lurking behind the words on the printed page". This research report is, inescapably, affected by my positionality as a white, middle-class, English-speaking South African with a whole host of other identity markers and past experiences that inform the way I filter the world around me. That said, I have approached my interviewees and this topic with care and the continuous work of reflexivity.

My methodology focused on student interviews, framed by the university's digital timeline, as I found that this addressed my research questions most effectively. From there, I established my key findings through thoughtful analysis, reflection and organisation. This approach led to a firm grasp of undergraduate anthropology student experiences during the pandemic, as I'll demonstrate through my ethnographic chapters which I outline below.

1.4 Chapter Outline

This research report has been structured chronologically, with each ethnographic chapter exploring third-year anthropology students' experiences, from pre-pandemic 2020 until a partial return to campus in 2022. "Infrastructure" and "sociality", as well as the "idea of the university" that results from their intersection, work as subchapter titles and guiding themes.

Chapter 2: The University Imagined & Encountered, considers students' introduction to the university campus before the COVID-19 pandemic changed the course of their undergraduate education. It focuses on students' hopes and expectations, as well as their first experiences of university life. In the subchapter *Infrastructure & the Campus*, I demonstrate that when students began university, they entered into a liminal phase – a transitional period between adolescence and adulthood – where the university campus worked as a "site of passage". Here, students often experienced a "paradox of independence" when their much-anticipated autonomy resulted in a new set of challenges. In the subchapter, *Sociality & Communitas*, I demonstrate how social connection counter balanced the more trying aspects of the university experience. A sense of communitas, or collective experience, helped students adjust to the new environment. In the final subchapter, the *Idea of the University as Liminal*, I demonstrate that the university experience students embarked upon extended beyond academic pursuits to encompass identity formation, personal growth and social engagement. I suggest that – by design, by accident, or a combination of both – the University of the Witwatersrand offered an education that was grounded in both people and place.

In Chapter 3: Return Home, I address how – through the evacuation of the physical campus – the layered infrastructure that makes university education possible became visible. In the subchapter:

Infrastructure in "Home" Spaces, I show that although the University of the Witwatersrand attempted to provide the resources students required for online learning, Wits was not able to replicate the university's safe and social learning environment, off-campus. In the subchapter, *Sociality & Incidental Biosociality*, I suggest that as the first lockdown unfolded, students formed biosocial connections. I term this act of social gathering "incidental biosociality", as it arose on the periphery of COVID-19 infection, not as a direct response to illness. Despite an initial surge in student sociality online, when faced with competing communities, for example high school friendships vs. new university connections, the former prevailed, resulting in the loss of the collective student experience. In the final subchapter, The *Idea of the University as Remote,* I explain that without access to the university's layered on-campus infrastructure or a sense of student community, the Liminal University was replaced by an individualised, isolated version of tertiary education.

In Chapter 4: Near & Far, I focus in on 2021, as the pandemic prolonged online learning for another year. The subchapter*, Infrastructure & Distanced Learning*, looks at the structure of online learning and its effects. The prioritisation of equal access for all students across varied material circumstances, although necessary, inadvertently resulted in a disconnected online learning experience, with little audio and visual interaction. During this time, some students settled deeper into their "comfort zones", while other students became disengaged due to the lack of connection and/or excitement in their academic lives. In the subchapter, *Sociality & the Return to Residences*, I illustrate two sides of the same experience, highlighting the significance of sociality – or the lack thereof – in student residences in 2021. Infrastructure in the form of quiet residence rooms, computer labs, prepared meals etc. was considered and provided, yet safe social infrastructure was not. Students who did manage to engage socially through their own active volition, felt more academically and mentally stable, while those who remained isolated struggled with motivation. This leads to the sub chapter, *The Idea of the University as Static*. In a pre-COVID world, students' undergraduate education offered new social experiences and exploration, both beyond and in conversation with their coursework; in contrast, the overarching university experience in 2021 appeared somewhat muted and inactive.

Chapter 5: The Return, explores students' reintroduction to a selection of on-campus classes in 2022. Third-year students found that, although they were senior undergraduates, they did not know how to physically and/or socially navigate the university campus. Yet, as I discuss in the subchapter, *Infrastructure & the Classroom*, small classes, implemented as a COVID-19 safety precaution, eased students' return to campus. The physical, social and educational infrastructure – from the familiar layout and movable furniture, to the facilitation of discussion and small group deliberation – created a communal educational environment where students were able to open their minds, actively participate and learn from one another. In *Sociality & Reconnection*, I explore students' apprehension about returning to campus, and how a shift back towards the collective university experience eased their discomfort over time. By reengaging with their classmates, in person, students recognised that many of their anxieties, academic or otherwise, were shared by their cohort. In *The Idea of the University as Interpersonal* I show that students' reconnection to their educators, classmates, and coursework – through small classes – reaffirmed the importance of facilitated social engagement within the educational environment. I suggest that a return to the collective experience defined the 2022 academic year, resulting in the Interpersonal University.

In my concluding chapter, I reassert the defining characteristics of each version of university education that arose from early 2020 until mid-2022, and what was learnt from each. I demonstrate how the threads of sociality and infrastructure wove through students' experiences, and establish their significance at different junctures. Finally, I assert my findings' relevance as the University of the Witwatersrand transitions into a new era, offer suggestions for their application, and highlight areas for future inquiry.

Chapter 2 - The University, Imagined & Encountered

2.1 Introduction

In February 2020, before COVID-19 entered our lives and lexicons, first-year students began their university degrees at Wits with certain hopes, expectations, and trepidations about what their university experience would entail. This chapter explores students' "idea of the university", before becoming first-year humanities students. It unfolds students' first few weeks on campus; how their lived experiences aligned with and diverged from their expectations; and what aspects of university life held the greatest appeal.

In the section *Infrastructure & the Campus*, I focus on the physical campus environment, and its role in the student experience. While navigating the physical campus, new students got lost, experienced anonymity, were faced with new challenges and concepts, and formed important social ties. Despite students' excitement for university life and the autonomy it promised, the shift to self-reliance within an unfamiliar space was decidedly "uncomfortable". Yet, this discomfort often proved to be an opportunity for growth. Through student accounts, I show that the campus itself facilitated a moment of liminal transition.

In the sub chapter, *Sociality & Communitas*, I explore the social experience that transpired in students' first few weeks on campus. I establish that, beyond academic interests, students saw the university as an inherently social space. New social relationships helped students navigate the university environment, and this collective struggle created a sense of communitas. In addition, as students met peers with varied identities and backgrounds, a different kind of social education began. Within this subsection, I also note the role of hindsight in students' reflections, observing how they represented this period of time in retrospect, long after their social landscapes had been radically transformed.

In the final subsection: *The Idea of the University as a Liminal Space,* I synthesize the key insights from the previous subchapters, reaffirming that the university was a site for social connection and personal growth. By noting students' experiences of disorientation, and connection, during their first few weeks at Wits, I reiterate that an undergraduate university education acted as an important liminal phase that aided student transformation while building a sense of "communitas" (Turner 2017; Beech 2011). I show that students desired "the whole experience", one that involves identity formation and new social ties, and reaches beyond course content and the eventual acquisition of their degrees.

2.2 Infrastructure & the Campus

"I was most looking forward to the independence", Divya shares, as she speaks of her initial hopes for university life. Like most of her peers, she was excited to be free from the rules and limitations of home and high school. Reflecting back, Divya expresses that before her first year of university began, she "was really looking forward to the campus and the lifestyle". Divya "associated university with the leaving home experience" but being a Johannesburg resident, she continued to live with her family, in an affluent housing estate in Johannesburg South. As a result, the campus itself held great symbolic weight. The physical university environment, including its placement within inner-city Johannesburg and its on-campus architecture and infrastructure, facilitated social encounters and personal challenges. As a result, going into campus every day gave Divya a sense of independence, even if it did not involve the clean break from home she had envisioned.

A liminal period, I suggest, aptly describes the undergraduate university experience, as students find themselves "betwixt and between" adolescence and adulthood (Turner 2017). "Going to" university is commonly conceptualised as a major transitional point in a young person's life (Maunder et al. 2013). Turner (2017, 359) explains that "the first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both". For many, graduating high school and leaving home – literally and/or symbolically – to enter the university space marks the start of this transition; a journey that is guided by university orientation, traditions and rituals. It presents challenges, a move out of one’s “comfort zone”, but also provides opportunities for new forms of sociality and identity formation.

In this liminal phase, the university is the “site of passage” (Miller 2018, 546), its infrastructure aids students’ transition through this liminal state. The University of the Witwatersrand is a sprawling, multi-sited campus, with infrastructure – including lecture halls, libraries, food outlets, car parks and computer labs – that shapes the student experience. From grandiose architectural design featuring expansive lawns and commanding concrete structures built for a former era, to myriad pathways, corridors and classrooms, this environment plays an active role in students’ university experience. The university campus contains familiarity, and yet, it is wholly distinct from other areas of society. Miller explains that “liminal periods are simultaneously place and space, familiar yet unknown and secure while also intimidating” (2018, 546). They can be “discomforting and destabilising, but also exhilarating and creative” (2018, 546). This combination of apprehension and excitement, of discomfort and exhilaration, describes how the students I engaged with felt during their first few weeks on campus. Entering into this new physical and social space, student experiences varied from thrilling, and enlightening, to dizzying and difficult.

Before they entered university most students, like Aisha, anticipated a “hectic schedule, always up and down all the time, very busy life, lots of assignments, lots of tests, lots of work”. When classes began, in earnest, some of their expectations proved accurate. Aisha found it difficult to adapt to this new environment. At the time, Aisha was living in Actonville, Benoni with her family in the home she grew up in. Recalling her first semester, commuting to campus every day, she shares:

> The first few weeks were an adjustment period for me, I needed to find a routine, I needed to find balance. I needed to find a way to stop being so tired. I really didn’t enjoy those first few weeks at campus. I had, I don’t know if they were breakdowns, I don’t know if I was anxious going to campus, but I would cry every day before going to campus, and on the way back. I just couldn’t do it. I was mentally exhausted; I was physically tired. I really didn’t enjoy my experience those first few weeks.

Aisha was not alone in her difficulties adjusting to university life. Maya, a first-year humanities student living in a Wits residence at the time, describes her introduction to the university in 2020 as “a few weeks of hell”. As someone who had craved independence before her university experience began, Maya was surprised by her own perspective flip. Having attended a Catholic high school where the code of conduct was strictly enforced – girls were made to kneel on concrete for their skirt lengths to be measured, and black hair was heavily policed – she had imagined university would be a “breath of fresh air”. Instead, she felt like she was constantly falling behind. The transition from home to university, from parental involvement to independence, felt abrupt, too much too soon. As a result, she became “reluctant to grow up”.

For others, their initial discomfort was a manageable, if not essential, hurdle to overcome. Some students prided themselves on skilfully “adapting” to their circumstances. It was seen as a rite of passage that required a certain level of resilience. Although discomfort does not always result in growth, when relatively controlled, it can be instrumental (Woolley & Fishbach 2022). A “pedagogy of discomfort” – traditionally used when teaching social justice – pushes students to challenge their personal beliefs, encouraging them to sit with their discomfort (Zembylas 2017). “Discomforting feelings” can be an important part of “individual and social transformation” (Zembylas 2017, 7). Learning how to accept and manage discomfort when faced with new experiences, environments, and ideas, is arguably a part of the broader educational experience students receive when attending university.

Dineo, a student who began her first year of university in 2019, as opposed to 2020, describes her transition to university as “scary, but at the same time, exciting”. When Dineo and I speak, over a video call, she is alone in a fluorescently lit Wits classroom. She comes across as friendly, but also cautious. She often looks to the side of, or above, her screen as she speaks, but shares her experience candidly. After high school, Dineo left Port Shepstone, where “everything is small scale, we don’t have the biggest walls, or the most people, everyone kind of knows everyone”. She moved to Johannesburg for university, which she found “a bit overwhelming” as “it was like I was in a foreign place”. For her, “moving away from home to a different province”, and feeling as if she only had herself to rely on, was unnerving. That said, she also looked forward to meeting “different people” and getting out of her “comfort zone”. This paradox of independence was something many students experienced. Despite the lure of independence, the shift to self-reliance in an unfamiliar space was, unavoidably, uncomfortable. Katlego similarly struggled with the double-sided nature of her new-found freedom. Despite dreaming about her campus experience during her high school education in Limpopo, going to university meant that she "had to, in a way, become independent", which she was dreading. As an introvert, she explains that she does not make friends easily, which made her first few days at university particularly challenging. Katlego elaborates:

> You know that feeling that you get when you come home from school after a long day, and you find your family, and you're able to relax, because these are people you are used to and familiar with. With university, it was a different experience, because it meant that I was going to come back to res, to one room, to nobody.

Finding yourself unmoored, as Katlego describes, is a part of the liminal transition. It involves getting and/or feeling lost, socially and spatially (Erichsen 2011). The campus itself surreptitiously aides the liminal process by providing a safe environment for wandering. Divya explains that, "in my first few weeks I would go to lectures, but in-between, I would just be exploring the campus, trying to figure out where everything was, because I would get lost, a lot". Divya believes that, "being on campus, not only the socialising, but exploring campus and getting to know your university and even your lecturers, the venues, the libraries" is an essential part of the "whole university experience". In Maunder et al.'s (2013, 129) study of university students, they found that "successfully negotiating transitions served particular functions by contributing to students' personal development, indicating that hurdles experienced during transition may have unanticipated benefits". Many of the students I interviewed actively engaged in finding their feet on campus and did not find this process entirely unpleasant. For most, it was difficult but enjoyable, or as Cara puts it, "intense but fun".

Cara, a Johannesburg resident living in Edenvale, found the travel to and from campus to be arduous. As Johannesburg is a complex city to traverse, the location of the University of the Witwatersrand is significant. The end of apartheid changed the inner-city landscape, as white-owned businesses and residences moved towards the suburbs, coinciding with "the movement of many low-income black households into inner-city areas", as well as the arrival of transnational migrants from neighbouring African countries (Wilhelm-Solomon 2020, 407). The social landscape of Johannesburg's inner-city is multifaceted and ever changing, as of late, through the gentrification of certain pockets and corners (Oloukoï 2018). Inner-city Johannesburg and its ever-changing character influences students' navigation to, from, and around the university campus. Many students have grown up within the greater Johannesburg metropolitan area, and yet, they might not have spent much time within the inner city itself. As such, I've found that the location of Wits university is another important part of students' liminal university experience, as for many, it presents a novel environment with varied possibilities.

For Cara, "going to university" involved long days. She describes "waking up at 4am" to catch a bus to campus and arriving home at "6pm". Although I sensed that these times may have been slightly exaggerated, I do not doubt that they accurately reflect how she *felt* (Jovchelovitch 2012; Thompson & Bornat 2000; Portelli 2010). This possible hyperbole conveys her subjective exhaustion, and the effort she expended during those first few weeks. Despite the tiring nature of her commute, Cara relished the social elements of campus life:

> When I first started university, it literally felt like a mini universe, outside of everything else. It was a world of its own. As much as it was tiring, it was so fun. It was really fun to be with friends all the time, to lie on the lawns and eat ice-cream, and get pies every Friday.

These small social rituals, and simply *being* on campus, brought Cara joy, and softened the negative components of her experience. Amahle, a student who had moved from KwaMtoyedwa – "just before eFolweni" – in KwaZulu Natal, to Johannesburg for her university education, similarly enjoyed the social side of campus life. She appreciated "being outside of class with my new classmates, even just grabbing food at the Matrix, or sitting by the library lawns, and taking in whatever was happening on that day". The campus – in this instance, food outlets and the library lawns – played a significant role in students' sociality. It connected students' images of university life to their reality.

The campus, through its infrastructure and architecture, facilitated students' liminal university experience. This liminal process relies upon the resources the physical campus provides but also the challenges it poses; it requires a combination of guidance and independence. The university's location in inner-city Johannesburg, a distance away from many off-campus students' homes; its sprawling campus that students struggle to navigate; the sheer number of students within the same age range which creates a sense of anonymity or invisibility but also provides opportunities for different encounters, collectively create a *site* for liminal transformation. Through understanding how students navigated the physical campus, we see that sociality was not seen as an auxiliary part of students' university experiences. Rather, it was both a part of, and a key motivation for, their university education, as I'll elaborate on in Sociality & Communitas.

2.3 Sociality & Communitas

"I imagined my experience at university to be something like, but not as crazy as, *Grown-ish*", Amahle states, when asked what she expected from her university experience. She elaborates, "that was my wish for my varsity experience", to make "a couple varsity friends, we would eventually get a place together, stuff like that". A spin-off of the comedy series: *Black-ish*, *Grown-ish* follows the Robertson family's eldest daughter, Zoey, as she navigates university life. A young, African American woman from an upper middle-class family, Zoey adjusts to her new-found independence with varying success, but forms strong friendships that help her learn from her missteps (Chaney 2018). Similar to *Grown-ish's* protagonist, Amahle's excitement was grounded in the sociality university life promised. For her, and many of her peers, sociality was not a side note, it was an essential element of the "university experience".

The Californian university setting *Grown-ish* presents is worlds apart from the University of the Witwatersrand, situated in inner-city Johannesburg. That said, the "idea of the university" that Amahle garnered from *Grown-ish* aligns with other students' expectations. Many Wits students value the show's core themes of genuine friendship and self-discovery, achieved through the university experience (Chaney 2018). Amahle, “heard that, in university, that’s where you get most of your life-long friends”, which is what she most looked forward to. Divya’s notion of university life also came from “overseas”, as she explains that, “there’s no representation of South African universities” – a reality that seemed to have implications for what students constituted a “whole” or “real” university experience. As many students’ “idea of the university” grew out of television and film, they were eager for the university sociality depicted on screen: parties, student residence events, and social activity between classes. Cara imagined that university life would involve “half studying and half going out with friends, going to parties and getting drunk and being social”. She envisioned “going to classes and having coffee between classes, and just, you know, having that whole social experience”.

It’s possible that this preoccupation with social activities in student’s reflections has been exacerbated by the dearth of student sociality in the two years that followed. As students had ample time to reflect on their first few weeks on the Wits campus while physically detached from the campus and their classmates, their recollections contain a sense of nostalgia. Thando expresses that she “always reminisces about that month and a half that we had of in-person classes”, when she was “living a really balanced life, there was school and there was play”. Moreover, Carse and Kneas’ (2019, 18) concept of “nostalgic futures”, which describes “not a longing for the past, per se, but for the possibilities it once held”, is also applicable. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students were not merely nostalgic about the piece of university life they had experienced, they were nostalgic for their younger selves’ imagined futures that would never come to be.

Unprompted, students enthusiastically reminisced about “O week” and “freshers” events during their first few weeks of university life. For certain students, social and academic anxieties were quelled during this time. First-year rituals, such as the “Wits game” and “O week parties”, helped students feel connected to the university community. Divya states that she “really liked O week because everything that I was hesitant about kind of diminished”. As she had “a lot of socialisation”, she “wasn’t worried about not making friends anymore”. In addition, “lecturers did introductory lectures, and they were very welcoming”. During this period, she realised that “there was nothing really to be worried about”, which made “the shift from high school to university go a lot smoother”. Through carefully considered orientation activities, lecturers, administration and senior students played a critical role in ushering students through the first steps of their liminal university experience, a moment that can be incredibly difficult without a certain level of guidance and/or support.

Maunder et al. (2013, 139) suggest that when students begin their university education, social relationships are crucial, as "the formation of groups" facilitates "adjustment in an unfamiliar environment". Upon starting university, Katlego found herself in-between two communities, one left behind, and one yet to be formed. She struggled with her transition to university, but her unease was alleviated through her engagement with other students. Katlego illustrates her experience through a story from her first day of class, when she could not find her lecture venue and suddenly felt overwhelmed. She "ended up having an anxiety attack", which took her back to her Wits residence. She remembers that when she returned, a new friend asked her why she wasn't in class. This new friend gave her some "tough love" and told her: "get yourself back to class, find it somehow, don't succumb to the pressure". This was advice she promptly followed, and tried to find her venue once more. Not long after this incident, Katlego made another "very extroverted friend who could ask anybody anything, and led me to class without having to sweat, so that was very helpful". In students' recollections, friendships formed on campus and at Wits residences provided the support needed to continue on when faced with challenges. What students describe links back to Turner's (2017) notion of "communitas", community or connection among those bound together by the liminal experience (Buechner et al. 2020, 1).

Students' emphasis on sociality was often linked to engaging with "different people", with high school experiences used as a base for comparison. For Vuyo, coming from an upper middle-class black family, and having gone to a mostly white private school, he looked forward to a new environment. He states that "I knew that it was going to be totally different from what I'm used to, in terms of the people that I'm going to interact with". For Amahle, having attended a small, all-girls boarding school, university also offered something new. As her high school classes had 25 students, "at most", going into lecture halls, "where there were 200 plus of us", was an adjustment. The liminal university period not only offers "a moment in and out of time", it also presents a moment "in and out of secular social structure" organised around certain social distinctions and status (Turner 2017, 360). Although university life is not free from social hierarchy, it does bring individuals with vastly different identities together, in a way that is seemingly rare outside of university grounds. As the University of the Witwatersrand gathers students from different geographic, racial, cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds together, it creates a unique setting for identity formation (Beech 2011, 288). Considering that "the self cannot be separated from the social and material context with which it relates" (Kohut 1984 in Erichsen 2011, 5), student sociality and engagement with one another, has its own educational merit.

Students' "idea of the university" held common, intertwined, themes of sociality and personal growth. Student sociality and communitas provided an incentive and sense of comradery that helped students persevere through the trying moments of their transition to university life and greater independence. University sociality also contributed toward individual identity formation, through exposure to different realities and perspectives. Through this subsection I've shown that the university education students desired – and caught a glimpse of in their first few weeks – was not purely academic. Rather, it was holistic, as I'll expand upon in my concluding subsection: *The Idea of the University as a liminal Space*.

2.4 The Idea of the University as a liminal Space

Reflecting on this particular period of time, what version of the university presents itself most prominently? In early 2020, the university was a space within, but also removed from, society, a contained labyrinth that encouraged identity formation and social bonding through shared challenges. It was, I suggest, a site for liminal transformation. The university – spatially and academically – set tests for students to overcome, but also provided opportunities for social connection. Following a liminal trajectory, undergraduates began anew when they entered the university space, engaged in multiple ritualistic practices, and formed social connections through their collective experience and/or struggle (Turner 2017). The blend of "lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship" present during liminal transformations from one identity into another, has clear connections to the university student experience.

A liminal phase, Beech argues, is a time when "the liminar reflects about their society and their cosmos in order to return to society in a new identity with new responsibilities and powers" (Beech 2011, 278). To Katlego, university, or rather the Wits campus, was "a place whereby I can learn anything, ranging from work to personal life", a "preview" of adult life away from "the comfort of home". This impression of university – and the "idea of the university" that students held and experienced – did not possess neat boundaries, rather it encompassed a holistic education.

The liminal university is an environment for all-inclusive learning, where discomfort and manageable hurdles provide opportunities to learn and form social connections or "communitas" (Turner 2017). With this acknowledged, the liminal experience was not always a perfect balance of independence and social support. For some students, it was too much all at once; they felt exhausted by the expectations placed upon them. This same moment, beginning university, was experienced in vastly different ways depending on the individual in question. With this acknowledged, whether certain students simply needed more time to settle in, to adjust before the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the campus closure, is a real possibility.

As students' reflections demonstrate, the campus constituted – in many ways – its own world. When students entered into their university education and the physical campus environment, they inhabited a new reality. Here, transformation was facilitated by the physical campus, through social areas for students to congregate and connect; student residences, where students tentatively began or advanced their independent lives; and space for students to wander, get lost, and discover new pathways.

2.5 Conclusion

University students commonly hold "internal images about university" which influence how they "form expectations and interpret experiences" (Maunder et al. 2013, 140). Students' internalised notions of what university *should be*, matters, as it shapes what they deem "normal", and therefore desirable.

Although students’ hopes for university were often based upon film and television narratives, situated in far-removed realities, the “idea of the university” most students maintained, has deep roots and real merit (Lanford 2019; Pritchard 2004). I found that despite a changing world and student population, the Humboldtian tradition – which believes a university education cultivates both the mind and character – lives on (Lanford 2019; Pritchard 2004).

Through students’ recollections, we see how the campus shaped their first few weeks of university life, aiding their transition within this liminal moment. The physical campus contains important infrastructure that enables learning, including lecture halls, libraries, computer labs, and internet connection, but it also – inadvertently – presents students with important obstacles to overcome. To be clear, I am not referring to challenges that demoralise. Rather, challenges that are surmountable, that build confidence, and are instrumental to students’ overall education and progression. These challenges take place both within and outside of students’ coursework and help to shape one of the university’s stated objectives: molding graduates who are “socially-responsive and adaptive to an ever-changing world” (University of the Witwatersrand 2022).

Although, “starting university is a notable transition due to the changes students experience at this time”, important shifts take place across students’ university careers, well beyond the “abrupt ‘rupture’ upon arrival” (Maunder et al. 2013, 148). Experiences of transition are not limited to the early stage of university life; students’ first year of university is simply “an important part of the long process of cultural, social and academic assimilation into the world of higher education” (Harvey et al. 2006, 7). As first-year students had only surpassed their introduction to higher education, before COVID-19 resulted in the Wits campus closure, I unpack how this disruption affected first-year students in my following Chapter: *Return Home*.

Chapter 3 – Return Home

3.1 Introduction

On the 15th of March 2020, the University of the Witwatersrand announced that face-to-face classes would be temporarily paused, as they grappled with the first known case of COVID-19 on the Wits campus. This initial disruption to teaching and learning was one of many that would unfold over subsequent days, weeks, and months. For first-year students, who were still acclimatising, familiarising, and building new support systems, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted their university experience before it had truly begun.

On the 16th of March, all students were asked to return home, indefinitely. This was a place of comfort for some, and a chaotic environment for others. The students I engaged with returned to – or remained in – vastly different versions of home. They inhabited multi-generational households, stayed with fathers they barely knew, with grandmothers who struggled with the concept of remote learning, and with multiple siblings vying for space and attention. Their realities ranged from homes that offered familial support, private workspaces, reliable tech, and consistent internet access, to homes that provided none of the above. The stability of these set ups seemed to greatly – and understandably – influence how students felt about their remote learning experiences. For some, staying at a university residence had been an escape from a far less dependable alternative; it had offered a refuge where they could focus on their studies and construct a whole new life. For others, returning home was a welcome respite from a difficult first few weeks of university life.

In this chapter, I illuminate how the return "home" was experienced, through third-year anthropology students' reflections. The subchapter, *Infrastructure in "Home" Spaces,* explores the material and social realities students contended with once leaving the physical campus. The subchapter, *Sociality & Incidental Biosociality* discusses community formation within online spaces. Here, I highlight how students initially sustained online connections with each other in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic's escalation. However, this form of biosociality – which I term incidental biosociality – did not last. As weeks turned into months, students struggled to maintain social relationships that did not have strong, in-person, foundations. In the final subchapter, *The Idea of the University as Remote*, I discuss how the university experience – as a holistic education where greater independence and the liminal transition from adolescence to adulthood takes shape – was disrupted, replaced by an isolated version of university education. I use the term "remote", as it refers to distance learning but also conveys the greater sense of detachment students experienced.

3.2 Infrastructure & "Home" Spaces

When the first national lockdown was announced, Thando describes herself as being "in denial, low key, about how things were changing". She had left her student residence for the first mid-term break of her first year at university, imagining she would return in two weeks. "Sheesh, it was a rollercoaster", Thando reflects, as she talks me through her experience over a phone call. Although I cannot see Thando's face as we speak, her WhatsApp profile picture presents a poised image. The photograph has been professionally taken. A young, slim, black woman wearing a black, long-sleeve polo neck rests her head on a softly closed fist, while looking directly into the camera. An African continent symbol hangs from a long silver chain around her neck. As we talk, Thando comes across as self-confident, comfortable in her own skin, but not performative.

When the hard lockdown was announced, Thando and her mom were staying in her aunt's home in Centurion. So, instead of returning home to Durban, they hunkered down for what they believed would be a short confinement. During those first few weeks of lockdown, Thando describes how she would spend her days on social media, followed by a "young devotion" her church was encouraging, and occasionally a movie with her mom and aunts. Initially, they were "on track, living harmoniously". But this sense of synchronicity did not last. After five weeks of hard lockdown, the nation transitioned from lockdown level 5 to level 4. The strict level-5 lockdown, with allowances made for grocery shopping, the movement of essential workers, and not much else, abated ever so slightly. At this stage, Thando's aunt's boyfriend moved into the home, and "things started to get tense". Thando expands:

> Her boyfriend was always drunk. He just really made it such an unpleasant experience to the point where I grew tired. It was almost exam time and I was so anxious. My mom was like: "you're going to need therapy after this, this is a lot". I was exposed to a lot that I didn't need to be exposed to at that point.

Thando's aunt's boyfriend would invite visitors into the home, despite the government's social distancing regulations. There was "a lot of noise, a lot of chaos". She began to spend time "just sitting in my mom's car, just to get away". She expresses that at this time, "I didn't realize why I was doing it, I just knew I found comfort and solace just sitting in the car, rather than being in the house". Right before the June exams, her mom's friend was leaving for Durban and asked if anyone needed a lift. Thando did not hesitate, she "jumped into that car".

Thando's experience is not unique, students found themselves in all kinds of "home" environments in the rush to secure alternative accommodation after the university residences shut. Katlego, another previously mentioned student, had been living in a university residence before returning home to the Sekhukhune District of Limpopo. Here, she lived with her grandmother and siblings, "there were six of us at the time". Although she enjoyed being back with her family, when studies recommenced online, Katlego found herself wishing she was back at Wits:

> I would have to go around the house to try and find a good network spot, just for me to do my schoolwork. If you had to come to me now and ask where the good network spots are at my home, I could show you without hesitating, because I had to go through all of that in first year. It was taxing, emotionally, mentally, and academically. I remember there was this one day when I got a 10% on a test because of poor network. I had the chance to only answer one question, due to poor network. From that day, I was done with home.

By network, Katlego refers to the signal needed to connect online, a reality that could not be improved by any of the provisions Wits was able to offer. Katlego details that as she did not have her own space, she had to write her exams "in front of everybody or while I was in bed". Beyond her own personal difficulties learning online, it was also an adjustment for her family, "they really didn't know how to accommodate me".

The Dean of Student Affairs, Jerome September, explains that the decision to close the Wits residences – with only two-day's notice – after the university's first case of COVID-19, was guided by projections received from Wits' experts in infectious disease. Fear over cluster outbreaks in student residences drove the rapid evacuation. September shares that, "we had to think about all sorts of layers in trying to evacuate students", unfolding the different arrangements that were made behind the scenes. He reveals that before the campus closure was announced, "we had already begun the conversation around how to ensure the academic year continues, and the issue of 'no student left behind' was central to that conversation".

Despite plans and preparations made at an executive level, students felt that, as Lorato states, "Wits did not really have a plan about what they were going to do". When the first nation-wide lockdown was announced, Lorato – a first-year student at the time – rushed home to Krugersdorp. For Lorato, it was "a very scary and unsettling couple of weeks". Regardless of the Wits' Executive Team's sensitivity to students' circumstances, emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT) still posed a monumental – if not impossible – challenge within the socio-economic context of South Africa. Official university correspondence on the 14th of April 2020, stated that "multiple surveys across the institution have revealed that between 10% and 15% of students do not have access to appropriate computing devices, adequate access to data or conducive learning environments". In contrast to these figures, when in conversation with students it appeared that having consistent internet connection; a reliable, user-friendly device; and a quiet, designated workspace, was a rarity. Students had one or two of the above, but few had all three.

Removed from the university campus – which provided important infrastructure and resources – certain students struggled to continue. For Thando, not having a dependable device was her biggest concern. As she was sharing her mom's laptop while she was staying at her aunt's house, she returned to Durban without a reliable device. In addition, Thando's cell phone would overheat and switch off mere minutes into a lecture or mid-tutorial. She would "literally have to wait for it to cool down" before it could be used. When asked if she applied for a loan device from the university, Thando explains that she did not believe she met the requirements, "there was the option to apply for a loan device, but I didn't have funding, I was a bit concerned about how I was going to pay for that". The initial loan device email stated that applicants had to be "NSFAS funded and students with a family income of less than R600 000 annually or Bursary/scholarship funded students who have not received devices from their funders". The cost of the device, the email stated, would be charged to the students' university fee accounts and would be deducted once the device was returned. It appears that some of the students who experienced continuous trouble with their devices, or relied on borrowing from family members, did not apply due to confusion over the criteria or an inability to pay for the device if they were unable to return it. This is a valid concern, especially for those living in precarious or transient home environments, where theft or damage are possible outcomes.

When Thando arrived in Durban, an aunt on her dad's side of the family said she could borrow her laptop whenever she was not using it. Although Thando shared that this arrangement worked, she had to travel from her grandmother's home – where she was living at the time – to her great grandmother's home, in order to use the laptop in question. In addition to this time-consuming agreement, Thando was expected to help her young cousin with his schoolwork. She reveals that "there were so many expectations of me, but it felt like no one was really checking in". Here, material circumstances and social conditions intertwine. At this juncture, Thando felt her "mental health was really just going downhill", and in September 2020, she "had two breakdowns in one week". She does not detail what form her breakdowns took, but elaborates that:

> The first breakdown that I had, I only reached out to my tutor because I had a tutorial assignment that I just couldn't start. I texted her and I said: "listen, I'm really struggling, I won't be able to hand this in by today". And she said: "It's fine, I understand. You can hand it in when you feel better". She even checked in on me.

This small expression of care Thando received from her tutor made a notable difference in the moment, but Thando realised she needed an environment that was conducive to studying if she was going to pass the 2020 academic year. Specifically, her home environment lacked a reliable electronic device she could use for her work; a focused environment where she could prioritise her studies without external responsibilities and distractions; and supportive social relationships.

The hurried removal of students from the university setting, revealed the importance of infrastructure, particularly in the form of stable electricity, internet, computer access, and designated spaces for collective and individual learning. Although educators at Wits were sensitive to students' plights during this transitional period of time, the exit from the physical university space resulted in a deeply disruptive student experience. The 2020 academic year may have been rescued, but the comprehensive educational environment – with its ecosystem of practical and social resources – could not be replicated in home spaces.

3.3 Sociality & Incidental Biosociality

During the height of the pandemic, the term "community" was frequently penned in official Wits correspondence with students. The university itself, the Dean of Student Affairs contends, came together as a community to address the colossal task the pandemic presented: transitioning to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT). He explains that the "traditional silos" broke down to allow communication to flow between departments and university administration, between student support services and educators. The ERT project required adaptation across all spheres of the University of the Witwatersrand and warranted a cohesive group effort from Wits faculty. That said, the notion of "community" becomes more complicated when we address student experiences. I found that a genuine sense of community was something new students had to forge on their own. A deep connection to the university – and their fellow "Witsies" – did not naturally mature after students left the physical campus space. Of course, a community of this scale is largely imagined (Kanno & Norton 2003), but for first-year students less than two months into their university education, they needed something tangible.

A few students managed to form friendships before leaving campus. In the beginning, when the first lockdown hit, students frequently interacted on social media, video calls, and WhatsApp groups. Coming together online in this fashion could be seen as a form of biosocial community formation that occurs in response to illness or disease (Dimond, Bartlett & Lewis 2015; Rabinow 1992). However, where this manifestation of biosociality differs from common conceptualisations is that it involves community creation by those who do not share the illness or disease but are nonetheless affected by it. This community creation that occurs on the periphery of, yet still in reaction to, illness or disease, I call incidental biosociality.

Incidental biosociality did occur in certain circumstances, especially within the beginning stages of the pandemic. Although these students did not, necessarily, contract COVID-19, their experiences in relation to COVID-19 and the social repercussions of the virus, created an opportunity for community formation. That said, when the conditions of online learning did not actively cultivate social connection, and in-person engagement was not plausible, this sense of community did not last. Divya describes this process:

> It was just nice to have someone help you if you didn't understand or just talk about the work, especially considering it was such a big adjustment for us. My friends and I would also call almost every single night, just to talk about how frustrated we were, and how overwhelmed and everything, so it was a support for us. So, I was able to connect with them, but it was just in the first few months, after that, people just stopped. We kind of grew distant because we weren't seeing each other every day.

When asked if she managed to connect with her classmates, Maya shares that she "did not have any friends" from Wits while studying online. Maya, as previously mentioned, attended a Catholic high school before joining Wits, and had hoped university would provide new social possibilities. In high school, she chose library visits over large group activities, lunch dates over parties, but hoped university would be different. She made a few connections in person, before the first lockdown, but there was not enough time for those relationships to truly bloom. Maya found it "hard to connect" to her classmates online, "as it felt like everyone was in a different time zone". With the flexibility that asynchronous remote learning offered, students created new schedules moulded around competing interests and responsibilities, destabilising a sense of shared time, or a collective liminal experience that cultivates “communitas” (Turner 2017).

Maya was nervous about reaching out to other students online. As “people have different productivity levels” she feared that if she asked someone to team up, she could be judged as “not up to standard”. Similarly, Dineo expresses that after university transitioned online, “if you didn't really have any friends in a course, or any people you could reach out to, you were on your own. You’d have no one to help you catch up with your schoolwork. So, that was terrible”. What students termed “anxiety”, presented itself in almost all students – in different shapes and forms – due to the uncertainty around how to engage with one another. For most students I spoke with, the social aspect of online learning was one of their biggest concerns, and deepest disappointments.

Maunder et al. (2013, 139), explain that when students start university, they often form “relationships of convenience”. As many students feel anxious about “making friends” when they arrive at university, they form quick ties, in order to not “sit alone” (Maunder et al. 2013, 145). Once students become more settled, they become more selective, choosing friendships that may be better suited long term (Maunder et al. 2013). As students did not get a chance to move past this primary phase in-person, the foundation for long-lasting friendship might not have solidified before COVID-19 resulted in the Wits’ campus closure. Naledi, a student living with her parents in Johannesburg, articulates her experience during that first year online:

> Meeting new people stopped when online classes began. I think that was one of my main stressors. Just not being challenged in that way anymore, no one to challenge my way of thinking, and the lonely aspect as well. I remember at the time, the Black Lives Matter social media thing was going on, and that was causing a lot of stress. There weren’t a lot of people to speak to about that, cause I wasn’t around a lot of people. Everything was through WhatsApp and social media. Social media itself is also toxic because there’s so much information that comes into your face at once, and usually you have that someone that you can de-stress with

> and discuss the things that you see on social media. But since it’s just me seeing these things, it’s a bit difficult. I guess it’s just the anxiety of it, the overwhelming stress of it all.

Other students spoke of the difficulty forming friendships when they could not tell “who was who” within WhatsApp group chats and online classes with other Wits students. As a result, most reverted back to connections made with their high school friends. In this sense, incidental biosociality possibly strengthened high school friendships that may have faded in light of the university experience. Similarly, familial relationships now formed the foundation of students’ in-person social lives.

Incidental biosociality did occur through online connection, but petered off over time, leaving a void for prior relationships, with stronger foundations, to fill. Technology facilitated communication, but many of these relationships could not deepen, and were not sustainable, purely online. When faced with competing communities, family vs. university connections, relationships grounded in consistent and/or continued in-person engagement outlasted those based on virtual interaction. That said, the sense of community that university life promised, is something students mourned. They wanted to meet new people, to have the “res experience”, to attend university events, to explore “Braam”, to try out different subcultures and societies. Students hoped for the opportunity to have the highly social university experience they had originally envisioned. Instead, university sociality became, as Naledi states, “just me, my phone and my laptop, and whoever else is behind the screen”.

3.4 The Idea of the University as Remote

When the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the Wits campus closure, the liminal university was replaced – after some refiguring – by the remote university. Despite provisions in the form of loan devices and free data; conditions for a *full* university education could not be mirrored online. The closure of the Wits campus and its ripple effects highlighted that, beyond material resources, the university acted as a world separated from student’s home realities. As such, my use of the term “remote” is twofold. It relates to distance learning, the physical separation from the university campus and the resources it provides, but also a detachment from something more intangible, the university experience.

The physical separation from student residences and the university campus had a destabilising effect on certain students who returned to home environments that were ill-equipped for their full-time studies. The separation from each other, as students were forming social connections and support systems for a new stage of life, was similarly unsettling. As I've demonstrated, incidental biosociality – bonding that occurred due to the threat of COVID-19 and its societal repercussions – did occur. Students connected with one another during the first lockdown, and the early stages of online learning, through calls and online conversations. That said, these connections did not necessarily deepen over the course of 2020, and often fizzled out when not dutifully invested in. When presented with competing communities, one made up of new university-based peer connections, and another consisting of established relationships with long-term friends and family, the latter won out. The remote university made it difficult to maintain relationships based on limited in-person interactions.

The remote university, which arose in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, struggled to provide an education that reached beyond course content, assignments and assessments. The shift from campus to home disrupted the liminal phase students had entered into only a few weeks prior. As Erichsen suggests, liminality involves "whole-person learning that encompasses all dimensions of being and requires space and time" (2011, 129). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent campus closure deprived students of the "space and time" needed to transition through this liminal university phase. In addition, they were not given the opportunity to establish a community, or "communitas", that would endure under vastly different circumstances.

3.5 Conclusion

The closure of campus affected both the physical and social university setting, interrupting students' traditional progression through a liminal marshland (Beech 2011, 287). For students repositioned in safe home environments with their families, the first five weeks of lockdown did seem to offer a welcome break from the more trying aspects of independence. That said, when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted university life, students often returned to homes they had physically, and psychologically, detached from. Sometimes, these were homes that weren't expecting their return, homes that could not accommodate their new set of needs as university students, or, in some cases, homes that no longer existed, refigured after their departure.

The return home, through its distinct departure from university life, reaffirmed what “going to university” *meant* and could provide. It solidified that, within a South African context, providing an equitable university experience for all students – that enables critical thinking, discussion, deep reading, reflection, community, and connection – requires a great deal from the university itself. It highlighted that most home environments cannot mirror the comprehensive offering the physical university space enables. The return home underlined the difference between the broad notion of community invoked by the university as an institution, and the more intimate sense of “communitas” desired by students (Turner 2017). Although incidental biosociality did occur among students during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, this sense of classmate community did not last. Enduring community, it appears, requires both a strong foundation, and at least some in-person engagement, to be both meaningful and sustainable.

In summation, I reiterate that the arrival of COVID-19 and the closure of campus created a disruption of a disruption. It paused a transitional moment, when difficulty often leads to growth and comradery (Beech 2011, 287). The “idea of the university” as an environment for a holistic education, was interrupted, replaced by a remote experience. Unfortunately, online teaching and learning lacked the elements of the university campus ecosystem that are not easily replicated when the student population is dispersed, as I’ll continue to explore in *Chapter 4: Near & Far*.

Chapter 4 – Near & Far

4.1 Introduction

As the pandemic wore on, into 2021, some students found a sense of routine in their online studies, while others fell deeper into disillusionment. In this chapter, I juxtapose the accounts of those who returned to university residences in late 2020 and 2021, with those who remained at home. I explore how students adapted to, or continued to bristle against, the online university experience, a reality dependent upon material and social circumstances, as well as individual temperament.

In the subsection: *Infrastructure & Remote Learning* I highlight how modes of teaching and learning developed from 2020 to early 2021. By taking a closer look at the infrastructure of online learning, I demonstrate that, to ensure students had relatively equal access to their learning content and materials, educators did not employ methods that relied too heavily on dependable devices, strong internet connection, or consistent power supply. In many instances, this resulted in the loss of synchronous teaching and learning, or interaction that involved hearing voices or seeing faces. Educators took students' academic and material considerations into account but overlooked their need for sociality. Within these circumstances, disconnection led to disengagement. Students felt a sense of stagnation at an age usually characterised by movement and growth.

In the subsection, Sociality*, The Return to Residences,* I focus on students' return to university housing in late 2020 and 2021. Through student' accounts, I unfold two opposing sides to this transition – one of increased isolation, and one where stronger bonds were formed. Although classes continued online, resourced residences made it easier for students to engage with their work. Socially, the return to "res" also offered a more collective student experience than home spaces ever could. However, as significant aspects of the university's social infrastructure were still missing, due to COVID-19 safety measures, some students still struggled with loneliness. University administration met students' material needs, through residence rooms, computer labs, internet connection, and prepared meals, but they did not prioritise safe social infrastructure. Students had to creatively carve out new forms of sociality within an environment that – although well-meaning – actively limited social engagement.

In my concluding subsection, *The Idea of the University as Static*, I grapple with the 2021 academic year as a whole – its shifts, stagnations, and shortfalls. The university that emerged from students' recollections appeared detached, with few opportunities for social movement and personal growth. Although some students sunk deeper into their "comfort zones", most students fiercely resented the solitary nature of their studies.

4.2 Infrastructure & Distanced Learning

In early 2021, students were allowed back into university residences. This vastly improved study conditions for students who had been living in difficult home environments. Katlego, who had struggled with patchy network connection in her grandmother's home, found that her experience with online learning became notably better. This, she attributes to her return to her Wits residence, "which proved to be very helpful in terms of internet connection". Although her classes remained online, Katlego "still had the opportunity to go to campus and just be". For those who stayed at home, the situation remained largely the same. By this point, most had adapted to online learning, but demotivation, and a general sense of disillusionment with their online predicament prevailed. Some students appreciated certain elements of the online experience: the flexibility, recorded lectures for revision, a healthy sleep schedule, and remaining in their "comfort zones", while others continued to begrudge its constraints.

Following the "panicgogy" of 2020, remote teaching approaches continued in a similarly eclectic – yet more thoughtful – vein in 2021 (Vandeyar 2021, 6). Sihle explains that each lecturer determined their own approach, "some had pre-recorded lectures, some would create slideshows with a voiceover, and then some lecturers would have a Zoom scheduled for a certain day in the week". Lessons that had taken place on WhatsApp, transitioned to structured online locations, while assessments became more flexible. Lerato explains that lecturers "considered things like loadshedding, and night owl and our data plans". In general, through their sensitivity to students' realities and acknowledgement of their humanity, educators engaged in a "pedagogy of compassion" (Vandeyar 2021, 6; Waddington 2021).

Although, from 2020 onwards, certain educators managed to implement creative approaches, which fostered "deep learning" and connection across distance (Erasmus 2021, 134), a well-intentioned commitment to "no student left behind" (Fouché & Andrews 2021) had unforeseen consequences. The use of technology was limited to what could be easily accessible, regardless of device quality, poor internet connection, and frequent power outages in the form of "load shedding". In certain instances, this resulted in the loss of voice and video discussion, in others, the loss of synchronous teaching and learning.

Sarah, a first-year tutor in 2021, explains that her tutorial took place through a discussion board, as video calls relied too heavily on data. As a first-time tutor, who was new to the field of anthropology, this form of tutoring felt like a manageable first step, less intimidating than in-person, on-the-spot lessons. That said, this mode of engagement, she reveals, was far from ideal. At a primary level, it was difficult to tell which students were attending each tutorial. Taking this as the foundation, interpersonal connection was near impossible. Sarah experienced students referring to her as "sir", implying that they did not grasp who she was as an individual. In addition, she found it difficult to get a distinct sense of who each of her students were. All she had to rely upon was her students' typed contributions, which few participated in. Around four students out of twenty took part, and "only about two of them engaged every lesson". Describing the key difficulties of the discussion board, Sarah shares:

> What was missing was that ability to truly connect to the student, as well as the ability to see if the students were understanding what you were saying, if they were confused, if they needed any clarification. And engagement, students were too nervous to engage, because a lot of them, English might not be their first language. Maybe speaking might be more comfortable, whereas writing, it makes them a lot more nervous, because it comes into spelling and grammar, and they don't want to mess up and embarrass themselves in front of their classmates.

While the difficulties certain second-language learners face when writing in English is an important consideration, students seemed to share a similar reluctance towards speaking in video/voice lectures and tutorials. This too could be related to language struggles, but there are also additional factors to consider. Lerato, a student who became less inclined to share her thoughts in class as online learning progressed, attributes this hesitancy to the possibility of peer judgement. Lerato suggests that, "when you're online it's kind of like a reflex or a routine to not ask questions because people can literally see your name there, see your face (photo), and people associate things". She highlights that, "when we get our marks back in an excel spreadsheet then people can see, oh that girl who was talking a lot in class, that's her name, let me check her marks, or that she's asking all these questions but she's getting *these* marks".

In general, reasoning for why actively engaging in online classes was difficult – beyond practical obstacles like internet connection, limited privacy, and faulty microphones – varied from student to student. This gave the impression that students were still trying to make sense of it, themselves. I suggest that, as limited sociality occurred outside of online class, speaking in class took on a heightened intensity. This was one of the only times classmates and educators could get a sense of each other, so the seemingly simple act of unmuting a microphone held greater weight than it might have if students were also meeting in person. When it came to speaking up online, or sharing concerns, Lerato believes:

> A lot of people do go through stuff, but it's just that they are scared to voice it, more often than not we are all feeling the same thing but you don't want to be the person to say it. Some people even just keep quiet knowing very well that they agree or a feeling is shared amongst a bunch of us.

The online educational environment appeared to increase students' social discomfort, while also providing opportunities for students to disengage. Amahle, a previously mentioned student originally from Kwa-Zulu Natal, felt that her "biggest challenge was a lack of discipline", which she believes was exacerbated by pre-recorded lectures. She elaborates that, "if in that week, I just had to watch two lectures, or go through two PowerPoint presentations, and if, in that week, I just didn't feel like doing my work, then I wouldn't".

As their university education became more mechanical, some students, like Naledi, felt as if they were receiving “half a degree”. Naledi began her university degree in 2019 and had experienced a full student life before the pandemic’s disruption. For her, the contrast between on campus and online education was acute. The mundanity of home life, and the blurred spatial and psychological divisions between work and rest, continued to bother many students who remained at home in 2021. Naledi expresses that, in 2021, “every day was the same, it was like I was trapped”. She expands, “this was not what I signed up for when I decided to go to university. I don’t think you just sign up for the educational aspect, I think you also sign up for the lessons you learn from being out in the world and navigating your way through life”. As many students who were struggling with disruptive or under-resourced home environments returned to university residences in early 2021, this sense of unease at home was not solely linked to material factors. Rather, it was related to the monotony of attending university online.

Although socio-economic realities continued to affect how students experienced remote learning, as the pandemic dragged on, a certain restlessness was prevalent across a range of different home circumstances. Many students felt disengaged, as Naledi articulates, “mental wise, I wasn’t excited anymore, about my degree, I just wanted to get it done. There wasn’t much of a university experience, there wasn’t something I was passionate about in my life anymore”. This loss of interest may have been dependent, in part, on students’ individual temperaments. While some students, like Naledi, felt demotivated, others thrived academically from the comfort of their home spaces. In her second year of online study, Aisha whittled down her work week to only three days. As someone who describes herself as “very introverted”, she expressed that she was happy at home with her family and her cats. By working from home, her energy was conserved. As she doesn’t like “being around crowds or being around lots of people”, she found that “being at home during the pandemic was perfect”.

As the traditional liminal period (Turner 2017) of university life – a time of transition and growth – had been cut short, many students felt as if their lives had become stagnant. Being confined to a waiting room, albeit a “comfortable” one, with no indication as to when their time would come, created despondency. The infrastructure of online learning in 2021 ensured that students had relatively equal access to their learning content and necessary materials, but overlooked the significance of sociality. In its absence, it becomes clear that beyond support and understanding, student sociality also worked as a motivator for academic engagement. In the following subchapter, I continue my focus on social connection and student well-being, exploring on-campus social infrastructure as a selection of students returned to university residences.

4.3 Sociality & the Return to Residences

In late 2020, requests to return to Wits residences significantly outweighed the limited, COVID-19 regulated, capacity. During 2020, Thando "applied to go back to res twice" and her "second application was successful". September, the Dean of Student Affairs at Wits, explains that "when the first batch of students were allowed to come back to res, we were guided by two broad categories". These were "academic reasons", those who needed clinical practice hours to graduate, and "social justice". The term "social justice" was used "to ensure that it was all encapsulating", September clarifies:

> It was difficult home environments; it was the one-roomed shack; it was the remote village where connectivity is a problem; it was LGBTQI+ students who found themselves in compromising home situations; it was women students in particular, who found themselves in abusive set ups. So, it was a broad range that we then tried to bring back as quickly as possible. But, of course, what also happens is that you have 500 beds, and you sit with 3000 applications for return. Some of it was really tough, we had to make some really tough judgement calls.

Thando was able to return to her university residence in November 2020 and wrote her exams while there. With this new sense of stability, Thando started to feel "so much better". She used the computer lab within her residence to complete her work, and although "the computers were very slow", they "got the job done". In her spare time Thando "would take long walks around campus", which was largely deserted at the time. Although Thando did find this period of time to be an improvement on her previous arrangement, as someone who describes herself as very extroverted, it was also considerably lonely. Although the material conditions needed to engage in her university education were restored, the social elements of university life were still largely absent in late 2020.

Although Thando ended 2020 in a stable position, only a few weeks into the new year, she experienced a devastating loss. Thando's mother passed away in January 2021. Forty minutes into our interview, Thando shares this piece of information, matter-of-factly. She does not mention the cause of death, and I do not ask. We take a beat. I drop the interview for a moment and check in with how she's doing at present. I ask whether she has ever used the counselling resources offered by the CCDU (Counselling and Careers Development Unit). She explains that yes, she has, but no, they were not very helpful. After contemplating her answer, she repositions the onus onto herself: "then again, I think if I had gone in with a more open mind, but yeah, I just don't think I stayed long enough to see results". She reveals that when she met with a counsellor, "I didn't really speak about my mom's passing per se, just life in general".

Counselling and career services are a critical part of Wits' student support infrastructure. During the pandemic, September explains that, "in some ways they (the CCDU) had to think outside of their own codes of practice and ways of being". They too, had to adjust to working online, over the phone, and over WhatsApp. In addition, "unreliable access to the internet or continually disrupted phone service due to economic precarity still limits the feasibility of these models of care, typically for those who need it most" (Kozelka et al. 2021, 3). September expresses that "there were instances where it didn't go as well as the student wanted it to go". It appears that, although vitally important mental health care services were available to students, they were not always effective within the conditions of remote engagement.

After her mother's passing, Thando describes her mental state as "shaky". Although counselling through the CCDU did not provide the assistance she was hoping for, she reflects that her friends were a dependable source of care and support. In addition, she believes that "the university opening up slowly, slowly but surely, made a huge difference". Thando details how, in late 2021, her friends "set up library dates", so that studying could take place within a social setting: "we made it a whole thing, we just hopped from one library to another to keep us going". Thando also found a strong sense of community within Every Nation, a nondenominational Christian church situated on the Wits campus. Every Nation describes itself as "a global family of churches", often positioned on university campuses, in part, to reach "the future leaders of society" (Every Nation 2022). As this church includes an amalgamation of students and staff, Thando describes receiving help from senior members of her church community when faced with university-related queries. She explains the significance of having a community physically around her during 2021, stating that “it's all good and fine to talk to people over the phone, but when you have people around you, they keep you accountable”.

Buechner et al. (2020, 23), states that, “collective transformation is a possible outgrowth of a shared liminal experience among a group that later finds communitas with each other”. Thando “gained some really great friendships” at Wits, friendships that she’s “learnt a lot from”, stating that “they’ve taught me patience, they’ve taught me to strive towards bettering myself”. As opposed to losing connections during the course of the pandemic, Thando found that “my friendships, some from res, some from my classes, really strengthened”. They bonded through “a lot of complaining about how unfair everything is”. Thando muses that these networks were nurtured by shared struggles, as “COVID was really doing a number on a lot of us, especially in terms of mental health”.

By maintaining university connections and actively participating in a Wits-based religious community, Thando developed a social support system *despite* the conditions of online learning. In contrast, Dineo’s story illustrates another side of the student residence experience in 2021. Dineo was excited to return to her Wits residence after having a difficult experience working from home. She had been living with her parents and two siblings in Port Shepstone, Kwa-Zulu Natal. As they didn't have “the biggest house”, she felt she “didn't have any sense of privacy”. Dineo describes her demotivation and distraction while studying at home, “It would be like my brain was playing games with me. I would know I had work to do, but I'm not doing the work. Why am I not doing the work? It was like an out of body experience”. Dineo had tried to return to “res” in 2020, but was only permitted in 2021, “when they allowed us all to go back”. Unfortunately, returning to her Wits residence in 2021 did not make her experience with online learning any easier. Rather, “it really went downhill, it was bad, and it got worse for me”. Dineo elaborates:

> It was more depressing than what I experienced in 2020 because most of the time, especially in res, most people were studying in their rooms. So, you're kind of in this room for the whole day. I only went out If I was going to get my food in the DH (dining hall). So that's the only interaction I’d get with outside people. But most of the time, I’m in my room, trying to do the

> schoolwork. I am someone who works well under pressure, I like to see other people work, that puts me in a state of “I should also be doing my work”. So, if I'm alone, I’m kind of stuck with myself and I can't really get out of that place. For me, it was kind of like, why should I go downstairs? I feel like they did try their best in terms of accommodating us. You didn't really have to leave your room.

This careful consideration of COVID-19 safety had unintended consequences for certain students’ sense of social connection and mental health. Social infrastructure, “refers to the networks of spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups that create affordances for social connection” (Latham & Layton 2019, 3; Klinenberg 2018). Although students’ material needs were provided for, the social infrastructure the university traditionally offers was missing. For example, students were not allowed to have friends visit their residence rooms. With few spaces to gather in-person, due to COVID-19 precautions, the “res” environment could be even more isolating for students who did not actively seek out alternative forms of sociality during this time. As many of the students I interviewed struggled with their mental health during the pandemic, the importance of – and the difficulty in – reaching out, only intensified.

During the pandemic, university leadership and administration displayed a certain blindness to the myriad social functions university infrastructure supports. Considering the monumental task of providing a robust university education through largely unfamiliar online modes and methods, it is not surprising that student sociality was left on the back burner. Online alternatives for traditional lectures and tutorials recognised students’ academic needs, but the social elements of these activities were not taken as seriously. Latham & Layton explain that social infrastructure may have different primary functions, but can “amplify connections within groups”, and “orientate people towards interacting across difference” (2019, 3). A library, for instance, may have the primary function of lending books and providing an environment for quiet study, but that is not its only function. A library also enables different kinds of sociality and interaction, but “you do not notice all of the social connections a library can help facilitate until the library has closed down” (Latham & Layton 2019, 4). As infrastructure often only “becomes visible upon breakdown”, “it is not necessarily noticed until it is no longer functioning” (Latham & Layton 2019, 4). Although the central functions of university infrastructure were recognised, the less noticeable social functions of campus infrastructure were not replicated in online learning environments.

Social infrastructure also involves “weak ties”, loose social connections and interactions with fellow students and Wits staff members (Sandstrom & Dunn 2014). Weak ties – expanded by Sandstrom and Dunn from the sociologist Mark Granovetter’s concept (1973) – highlights another layer of social connection that is often forgotten (Sandstrom & Dunn 2014). Sandstrom & Dunn (2014) suggest that weak ties, in the form of positive interactions with strangers and acquaintances, contribute towards our sense of connectedness and subjective well-being. As Parson explains, “loneliness is not only a longing for close relationships, but a longing for social places and practices which often facilitate seemingly banal social interaction” (2022, 1). Through brief engagements, moments of acknowledgement, or a simple sense of togetherness, the pre-pandemic campus space facilitated multiple forms of meaningful sociality.

As COVID-19 fears and regulations still restricted how students could interact within university spaces, a return to Wits residences in 2021 was not necessarily a return to previous forms of university sociality. What both Thando and Dineo’s stories illustrate is the importance of social infrastructure, the social scaffolding that provides practical and emotional support. Students require material resources and “physical environments that are conducive to learning” (Fouché & Andrews 2021, 153) but they also heavily depend upon university infrastructure’s secondary, social functions (Latham & Layton 2019). Thando found community through her own resourcefulness: actively engaging in a Wits-based religious group, reaching out to old friends, and revitalising university spaces for social connection. Dineo, stuck in her "res" room with little reason to leave, found it more difficult to do so. As Fuentes explains, in the context of COVID-19 “our socialness, usually such a benefit, becomes a perfect pathway for invasion”, and yet, as our sociality is an essential part of who we are, “*not* being social is not an option” *(*Fuentes 2020 24). With hindsight, we see the error in positioning COVID-19 safety and student sociality as an either/or equation, as opposed to a critical problem to be thoughtfully negotiated.

4.4 The Idea of the University as Static

The second year of online learning – with no definitive end in sight – created a sense of unease. By 2021, most students may have adapted to remote learning, but they did not accept it as an adequate alternative. Online lessons, in their consideration of different students’ material circumstances, inadvertently created conditions for student' disengagement. The Static University relates to a certain paralysis, how students felt *stuck*, as if they were aging without gaining the life experience necessary for maturity. In addition, the term "static" evokes a grey fuzziness, a low hum, without clarity of sound or image. This sense of stasis, of disconnection, became more pronounced as pandemic-era online learning continued for a second year.

For Dineo, the return to her student residence in 2021 provided access to the necessary resources for her studies and a quiet academic environment. However, she continued to feel a similar sense of social isolation to her peers who remained at home. Dineo shares that "it was really depressing because I felt like I was stuck". In 2021, after academic setbacks and a failed course, she felt defeated. She shares that "to me, that was heartbreaking, and it was kind of hard to feel motivated or even just energetic for school". Dineo thought, "my brain was working against me". In her Wits residence, Dineo "didn't have a support system or someone to show me that you know, just keep on working, everything will eventually work out". This demonstrates that, beyond the clear benefits of positive social engagement for overall well being, it is a central motivator for students' active academic participation.

Of course, a full cessation of growth is not an accurate portrait of students' experiences of university during 2021. It is decidedly hyperbolic, but it does reflect how students *felt* during their second year of online study. Despite students' seemingly fixed positions at home or within their residences, they continued to change and learn, albeit at a slower pace or in unanticipated directions. In addition, there was plenty of movement within the university as educators adjusted their approaches to teaching and learning, adapting to an ongoing and unpredictable crisis. It must be noted that the static nature of the university was beneficial in certain respects, it provided students who returned to Wits residences from difficult home environments with stability. It also suited students who work best independently, in controlled conditions. Rather than implying a fixity that did not occur, I present a Static University that falls in contrast to the Liminal University. Where the Liminal University provided something exhilarating, fluid, and inherently social, the Static University often proved disconnected and repetitive in nature. Through its absence, the need for sociality and multidimensional challenges integrated into the university experience, only became more pronounced.

4.5 Conclusion

Although students were now familiar with the process of online learning, the second year of distance study seemed to hit one, monotonous note. Students' hope that there would be enough time to re-engage in their "university experience" at a later point, after the pandemic subsided, diminished. The excitement and the promise of social connection, of novel experiences, that usually balance out the more mundane or difficult aspects of university education were missing. Although many students who remained at home during 2021 felt "comfortable", this sense of comfort was at odds with where they felt they *should* be at this point in their lives. For some, this comfort was enticing, they embraced it, enjoying being able to work in their own time, on their own schedule. For others, it was stifling. One's late teens and early twenties are usually characterised, to some extent, by risk, by "putting yourself out there" in order to learn through experience and transition from adolescence to adulthood. As students were "stuck" at home, reliving the same day, they did not sense that this "growth" was occurring.

The infrastructure of distance learning, the style of online education that prevailed in 2021, exacerbated this feeling of inertia. That said, due to students' differing home circumstances, there may have been no viable alternative. In order to provide an equitable educational experience across the student body, a flexible schedule was needed. That said, asynchronous classes and lessons without interactive video and/or voice, did not come without another set of consequences. Many students did not feel engaged in their topics of study, but would simply do what was required of them without much feeling or personal investment. Some students enjoyed the efficiency of online education, while others believed they were only receiving "half a degree".

"Unmuting", verbally commenting or responding to a question, took on heightened importance in synchronous online classes. As students did not truly know each – incidental interactions that naturally occur in person before and after class were not occurring – speaking up in class became a pressurised endeavour. Verbal interactions with classmates and educators, not to mention visual and verbal discussions, were few and far between, as such, "unmuting" attracted an uncomfortable spotlight. Students disliked that their words, taken as short sound bites without a greater understanding of who they were, could be picked apart by their peers. Alternatively, speaking more than others, could encourage what some students viewed as unwanted engagement from their classmates. In this online setting, the simple act of unmuting one’s microphone was not uncomplicated.

The return to university residences primarily demonstrated that, although students’ practical needs were now being met, their social needs were not. Consistent power supply, WIFI, hot water, cooked meals, and quiet spaces, made a considerable difference to students’ everyday realities and ability to engage with their work. That said, due to COVID-19, social infrastructure was intentionally curtailed, and its role in student’ wellbeing, especially students returning from home spaces to quiet "res" rooms, was overlooked. Students’ academic motivation and wellbeing were directly linked to both overt and more subtle forms of university sociality (Sandstrom & Dunn 2014).

Chapter 5: The Return

5.1 Introduction

2021 offered many moments of normality, followed by disappointing retreats to a COVID-19 dominated existence. As such, an air of apprehension continued to hang over the early months of 2022. In this chapter, I highlight how students in the final year of their undergraduate degrees navigated the university anew. As they reengaged in on-campus classes for particular courses, I demonstrate that this was not a "return" to the familiar, but rather, a reintroduction to a changed educational landscape.

In the subchapter, *Infrastructure & the Classroom*, I address students' apprehension about returning to the university. As students re-joined the physical campus space, they felt disoriented, unsure of how to inhabit the social environment. As older undergraduates, they received little guidance; in addition, the level of responsibility and academic performance required of third-year students added additional pressure. Yet, third-year anthropology students enjoyed the smaller classes and the opportunity to engage with one another. Despite mask protocols, students relished hearing their classmates' opinions and seeing their hand gestures as they spoke. In-person classes offered a return to interactive learning where students were not only learning from their educators but from each other.

In the subchapter *Sociality & the Collective Experience,* I explore students' anxieties about the campus space and how they became less acute over time. The in-person environment helped students to recognise their own struggles in those around them. After an isolated, individualised online experience, the return to in-person classes demonstrated that many of the personal and academic challenges students faced were shared concerns. In addition, when engagement was no longer the "option" it had appeared to be online, students learnt to speak despite their discomfort, and over time, became "comfortable being uncomfortable". My final subchapter, *The Idea of the University as Interpersonal*, concludes that the return to interactive education proved both personally and academically meaningful. The infrastructure of in-person classes created a richer educational experience, while the sociality of small classes slowly eased students' internalised anxieties.

5.2 Infrastructure & the Classroom

On the 3rd of December 2021, Wits students received a university-wide email stating that "teaching will take place in a blended mode in 2022, that is a blend of online and on-campus activities". This was a surprise to third-year students, some of whom had resigned themselves to the fate of being "Wits stay-at-home graduates". The email specified that students would "receive detailed information about the specific days and times" they would be expected on campus, well before the first term began on the 28th of February, yet, in Aisha's memory, she was only given "two-or-three days' notice". Having "felt so comfortable at home", she explains that "moving out of my comfort zone, it really was a challenge for me to mentally prepare myself to come back". For students who had grown accustomed to their online education, the campus and the infrastructure of in-person learning now represented the unknown. As September, the Dean of Student Affairs, unfolds:

> For third-year students it's this real challenge, that I've not really had a university experience, and now I'm out-ducted. I've just arrived, I've had a month on campus, I was sent home, I spent my university life online, I returned to campus, and I have to deal with the anxiety of what it means to be back on campus, what it means to have contact sessions again and I want to now have this university experience, but it's the end of my degree, in some instances. And I have to find a job, and think about post-grad studies, or life beyond, when I've actually just arrived. So that's a major challenge.

Lerato shares that, as the 2022 academic year began, she "felt like a first year again trying to figure out where everything was and having to interact with other people". Cara too, felt disorientated. After asking someone on campus for directions, she imagined that they thought she was "this little first year who is so lost". Students experienced a disjuncture between their position as final-year undergraduate students and their uncertainty about the environment they inhabited. As third-year students, getting lost no longer felt like a difficult-yet-necessary part of the university experience. To them, first-year teething issues should have been distant memories.

The material and social infrastructure of the campus students returned to was unfamiliar, not simply because they had only gained limited in-person experience two years prior, but because the environment they returned to was notably different. At the beginning of 2022, students were required to wear masks, their lessons had been designed to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 infection, and social distancing was still actively encouraged. However, certain COVID-19 safety precautions incidentally resulted in positive improvements for students' academic and social engagement. Restrictions to the number of students per classroom resulted in smaller, more intimate groups of around 30 to 40 students in each lesson. The continuation of online instruction for certain lectures and tutorials also produced a quieter campus environment, which offered certain benefits, especially when students were first adjusting. Divya explains that she "enjoyed it that way", as she "had access to more things because it wasn't that busy". What she appreciated most were smaller classes, as it was a "classroom setting, but in university, where you had more assistance and attention, it was just easier to manage and to cope". This restructuring and reorganisation of educational infrastructure inadvertently allowed students to ease back into on-campus, in-person classes.

Although face masks were mandatory, students enjoyed hearing their peers express themselves and seeing their hand gestures as they spoke. They appreciated engaging with their lecturers in person, being able to ask questions in what they described as a "natural", less intimidating format, in comparison to online instruction. Within this classroom setting, lecturers even appeared more friendly, as Cara states, "when I email my lecturers, they act so distant, almost like you're wasting their time, but in-person they are so much more willing to help you, they are much more receptive". In this sense, the infrastructure of in-person lectures and tutorials: the class size, the classroom setting, the facilitation of student discussion and educator-student engagement, created a more interpersonal experience than online lessons were able to offer.

As online learning during the height of the pandemic was not always conducive for engagement between students, small, in-person classes offered a return to interactive education. Layla, a Masters student who tutored a second-year course, shares that "sometimes students would tell me something, or answer a question in a certain way that I'm like: wow, I didn't even think about it like that". For her, tutoring in-person has been "a collaborative learning experience". For students, discussion and debate, as well as learning from everyone in the room – not simply the lecturer or tutor – was an important part of in-person classes. As Thando explains:

> I came to Wits for that full experience of being a student and that includes in-person classes. I think it’s easy if you’re online to just get distracted by whatever. You have your lecture on your laptop, but you’re on your phone on social media. But in class, not only are you learning from your lecturer, but you’re learning from other people in class, from discussions.

Vuyo, who as previously mentioned attended a predominantly white private boarding school and had looked forward to engaging with different kinds of people within the university environment, shared Thando’s sentiment about the importance of learning from your classmates. He states that “as the weeks went on, there were more debates, people speaking more freely, and it was good to hear from different perspectives”. This, Vuyo expresses, did not often occur during remote learning. From his perspective, “it's hard to type what you want to say, so in person, you're able to express yourself better than you would online”. The structure of in-person classes, where students could simply raise their hands and speak, facilitated a return to engagement, and as a result a greater diversity of opinion. As Lerato explains, “interacting with other people is an important part of the university experience as it opens your mind and forces you to see things from other people’s perspectives”. This involved, as Thando experienced, learning how to accept “other people and whatever opinions they may have”.

This move towards appreciating differing perspectives was prominent throughout students’ accounts of in-person classes and the return to campus. As Sihle explains, she found worth in “being challenged by people who don’t think similarly to the way that you do, it forces you to question yourself and revisit your own views”. Through discussions in class, and on campus in general, Sihle was able to practice putting herself “in other people’s shoes”, to become “a part of other people’s worlds”. For Vuyo, this was important, not simply for the present moment, but for navigating different social contexts in the future. He explained that when students leave the university campus, “you're going to interact with a lot of different people, especially in the stuff that we're doing, and it's important for us to hear and listen to different ways of thinking and learn from them”. As these particular skills are valued within the field of anthropology, and within the humanities in general, in-person classes and on-campus interaction contributed a vital layer to students' educational experiences that was not accessible online.

In contrast to students' first-year' preoccupation with external sociality – after and in-between classes – a focus on engagement within classroom settings took precedent in their final year of undergraduate study. Students' appreciation of discussion and debate in 2022, demonstrates a maturity that was gained over the course of their degrees. Students viewed at least some meaningful engagement with their classmates, tutors and lecturers as essential. When reflecting on students' accounts, Simone's (2004) thesis that views "people as infrastructure" holds true. In this context, educators and students "cocreate" the classroom space, as their interaction shapes the education students received (Simone 2004).

From students' reflections on blended learning it became clear that, although socially engaged classes were effective, not all university activities needed to take place in person. Masego, a Wits athlete and a member of her residence's house committee, proposes that, "the university should actually stick to teaching us in person and then when it comes to assessments, we must be home, in comfortable spaces, in calm environments". This sentiment was shared by many of her classmates, who enjoyed the smaller classes, the engagement with lecturers and peers, but felt overwhelmed by the thought of on-campus assessments. Their final year as undergraduates held additional demands to perform, as their grades could affect their academic and/or career options moving forward. Third-year students were concerned that they would have to write their first in-person exams in their final year of undergraduate study, which could negatively impact their academic performance at a crucial point in their university education.

Despite the merits of in-person learning, certain students clung to the flexibility that the pandemic-era university allowed. Maya explains that "there are certain life challenges that arise that prevent you from attending every lecture religiously". She elaborates that some students "have grown to be independent, and have gotten accustomed to online learning, so much so that some people even have jobs". These jobs, Maya clarifies, enable certain students to make ends meet while attending university. With this in mind, she suggests that being cognisant of students' stressors and responsibilities, "beyond the pandemic", can provide educators with insights into why in-person attendance may be lagging. She elaborates that some lecturers interpret their students' actions uncharitably, resulting in misunderstandings. Here, we see the importance of accounting for both "the planned and the experienced" when addressing educational infrastructure and its effectiveness, as educators' intentions and students' experiences often diverge from one another (Goodyear 2021, 42).

The return to campus for a selection of lectures and tutorials was difficult for students who found themselves in an unfamiliar campus environment with new rules and expectations. However, once students acclimatised, on-campus education proved interpersonally connected and intellectually fruitful. Hearing their classmates' varying opinions and perspectives, asking their lecturers questions in real time, and being able to share their own insights more naturally, led to a richer understanding of their course content. The infrastructure of small, in-person classes fostered, as Layla suggested, a "collaborative learning experience".

5.3 Sociality & the Collective Experience

As students returned to campus, their excitement as well as their trepidation predominantly stemmed from imagined social interaction. The university environment was not the bustling space they had left behind in 2020, it had new social rules they could not fully prepare for. Vuyo shares that, when he returned to campus, "everybody was still on edge with COVID". Lecturers were saying: "keep wearing your masks and social distance". It was a return to an innately social setting, where conventional social behaviour was discouraged. Vuyo, who had spent the last two years living at home with his parents and older sister, found this new social terrain to be disconcerting. He explains that "for my cohort, it was quite nerve-racking, because we did not know how it all works".

Cara speaks to this uncertainty, sharing that "even the lecturers could see that, wow, this really is the class that has been taught online for the last few years. She (the lecturer) said that when we walked in, it was just so quiet and nobody was talking to each other. It was just an awkward space because no one knew how to act". Lorato explains the origin of her hesitation, explaining that "as I was inside the house for a really long time, and the only way I communicated with people was through a screen, I was a bit anxious about having to interact with people in-person again". Students' limited in-person interaction with their peers during this time resulted in heightened apprehension towards unfamiliar social situations. Beyond their unease, certain students held the belief that they changed as social beings. Sihle expresses feeling as if she had been "reverse socialised" over the course of the pandemic. She explains:

> Looking back at my university experience during the peak of COVID, I feel like I did lose a lot in terms of my experience, my university experience. Mostly, the social aspects, meeting new people, networking, getting to know new people. I lost my curiosity. I think mentally I aged more, not in a way of maturity but more in the way of energy, social energy. I didn't have the desire to go out anymore, or to meet new people. I think even after certain aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic have calmed down, those things I find have not recovered yet. I still do not have as much of a desire to go out as I did back then and even go to campus now. The motivation that I was talking about before, getting out and going to campus, I think that excitement and that curiosity, and the adrenaline of it all, has turned into anxiety.

The curious energy students possessed when their first year at university began, had diminished. Upon their second introduction to the university campus, another energy, it seems, took hold. "Anxious" was the primary, and most common, response to the question, "how did you feel when you learnt that you would be returning to campus for certain classes in 2022?". Maya felt that the COVID-19 pandemic heightened her "social anxiety interacting with people I don't know".

Throughout my interviews, psychological language peppered students' descriptions about how they felt at different intervals. References to mental health, specifically anxiety and social anxiety, emerged across multiple conversations. Students tended to pathologize their state of mind, rather than framing it as an appropriate reaction to difficult circumstances. This may be due, in part, to a shift in language use and the proliferation of mental health related terms in popular culture and common lexicons (*Haltigan et al.* 2023; Gibson 2021). It may also relate back to an increase in mental health literacy and the reduction in stigma around mental health struggles (*Haltigan et al.* 2023). That said, as Gibson

(2021, 10) explains, this “medical view of distress can also easily distract us from the very real difficulties that contribute to young people’s distress and pathologizes what might be ‘normal’ reactions to these”. It was not clear whether students considered their anxiety a mental health disorder or simply used “anxiety” as an emotive word to express intense worry. What is clear, however, is that most students experienced a state of heightened psychological distress in relation to their return to campus.

The use of psychological language suggests an emphasis on the individual self, on internal challenges rather than a collective experience. During individualised online learning, there appears to have been a redirection of energy, inward, as Naledi explains:

> I think that during Covid we got more selfish, not selfish in the way that we don’t think about how what we do affects other people, but selfish in the way that our first priority, or the only priority for some people, was taking care of ourselves and making sure that we were healthy, living for ourselves and protecting ourselves. Forgetting that there are people out there who need someone to talk to, need someone to help them. Not only through tutoring or speaking about coursework but also through consoling each other, and speaking to each other about the challenges we face in everyday life.

Layla explains that the pandemic “highlighted that we all go through different experiences and different hardships and different struggles, and that we need to be highly aware of that”. Reflecting on her pre-pandemic undergraduate experience, she does not think a strong sense of care existed within the university space prior to the pandemic, “if you didn’t have a doctor’s letter saying you were going to commit suicide or a doctor’s letter saying that you’re in hospital for a week” then the attitude seemed to be “too bad for you”. From Layla’s perspective, the pandemic moved us toward a greater awareness of students’ challenges and a more compassionate educational outlook. Yet, as Waddington (2021, 6) argues, “you cannot have compassion without some form of interpersonal engagement”. Although educators incorporated empathy and understanding into teaching and learning during the pandemic (Vandeyar 2021), students’ care for one another was not always sustained. The asynchronous nature of online learning meant that, as Maya explained in Chapter 3, students were in “different time zones”.

Students dealt with similar challenges, yet were not necessarily able to connect with each other to process their predicament as a collective.

While smaller classes helped students open their minds through engagement with one another, which provided a richer learning experience, they also reinstated the collective experience. When classes were in person, participation was a requirement for all, which resulted in group engagement. Referring back to online lessons, Maya shares that “sometimes it can be nerve-racking to just unmute yourself, right? But when you are asked a question physically, you’re forced to engage, as opposed to treating engagement as an option”.

When engagement is no longer an option, students have to participate despite their discomfort. This, Layla expresses, proved to be a positive step, as students often felt a similar way about class engagement. Layla details that “sometimes you can see that the person talking is anxious and you can see they’re scared, but I think that gives other people the confidence to say what they want to say too”. Within this setting, students could recognise that their anxieties were collectively felt, as opposed to an individual, atypical struggle. It appears that familiarity between classmates led to greater engagement, Maya elaborates:

> I think that because when we’re in person, we’re able to discuss in class and engagement is so much better and so much more than online. I mean at first it wasn’t, when we first got into class it wasn’t, because everyone was anxious, and everyone was still trying to read the room and thinking about how they were going to engage and interact. But, as the weeks went by, it got so much better, there was more engagement. We were all familiar with each other, so it felt more like a safe space.

This notion of “safe spaces” emerged at multiple points, as social environments where, as Thando explains, students could “move out of isolation” and find connection. The experience of returning to campus for a few, small in-person lectures and/or tutorials, really changed how students felt about in-person classes. Even its fiercest critics, those who – given the choice – would return to online learning, expressed that it was not as bad as they thought it would be. Aisha shares that having lectures that were "just like tuts, smaller groups, we were only about 40 people in a class", really helped. Over time, she "wasn't as anxious and worked up about it".

Temperament was often used to explain why students warmed to, or disliked, in-person teaching and learning. Although some, like Aisha, believed "in-person classes are useful if you are an extrovert and you like being around people" but are not essential for introverts, this was not the dominant view. Sihle shares that, "even though I consider myself more of an introverted person, or someone who is not as social, I think having in-person classes has kept me from becoming lonely". She expresses that, although "such social experiences may cause me anxiety, they also teach me to be comfortable being uncomfortable, and get me out of my comfort zone". She stresses that *because* of her introversion, in-person classes helped her to "put myself out there".

Sihle shares the benefits of being a part of a group within an academic setting, "when you walk into class and you're confused about something you've read and you see that someone else is also struggling, you feel less anxious about going into that lecture or that tutorial". The collective learning experience reminded students that they were not alone in their experience. Layla emphasises the value of "being in the same boat". This sentiment is something Thando feels strongly about, and reiterated at multiple points during our interview, stating that "I do think there is a lot of awareness about mental health, I know there is CCDU, but if there were more spaces where people could feel safe to open up about their mental struggles and the school pressure. I think there's a lot of pressure in university, it can be overwhelming, a lot of it can be crippling". For her, the antidote to this seemingly pervasive student anxiety lies in "safe spaces" where students could "come together" and work through their struggles as a collective.

Through student accounts I've found that "collective struggle", academic and personal, can be powerful within a university environment. As students' online experience had been highly individualised, and often asynchronous, a return to campus for certain courses offered a return to the collective experience. The recognition that the anxieties they had internalised were often felt by those moving through the same experience led to understanding and compassion between students. This proved instrumental as students eased out of isolation and back into university sociality.

5.4 The Idea of the University as Interpersonal

In 2022, the university that third-year students returned to was still in a process of re-figuration. The Wits campus had tentatively reopened to most of the student population, as they implemented a hybrid pedagogical approach called blended learning. As a COVID-19 safety precaution, students did not return to large lecture halls, rather, they gathered in small classes. These classes – incidentally – encouraged students who were resistant to on-campus learning to re-engage with their topics of study and each other. This partial yet poignant revitalisation of the group experience culminated in the Interpersonal University.

As participation within the in-person setting was no longer the “option” it had been online, students actively engaged in class discussions. Within this setting, learning became collaborative, as different perspectives resulted in a broader understanding of the course material. Over time, through participation and the recognition that their classmates shared their social and academic anxieties, students adjusted to the in-person experience. Students’ education slowly shifted away from being hyper-individualised, towards a more collective practice. As Layla explains, “what cannot be replicated online is the sense of community”. She describes the collective experience as being “in the same boat”, a sense of togetherness that transforms stressful episodes into communal experiences.

The Interpersonal University reasserted the importance of facilitated social engagement and the collective experience within university education. That said, students resisted the idea of in-person examinations, which produced additional stressors and distractions. Students’ perspectives emphasised that the mode – online or in-person – of teaching and learning should fit the intended outcome. The *quality* of social university activities mattered more than their frequency.

5.5 Conclusion

The announcement of a return to campus, although exciting for some, was not met with the elation one might expect. After the pandemic left many students feeling socially disconnected from their classmates, they were hesitant to re-engage. Although students had craved connection throughout their online university experience, the dearth of sociality during this period of individualised learning fed students' anxieties, which made for a challenging return to the social campus environment. Some students felt as if they had been socially reconditioned over the course of the pandemic through remote learning and social distancing, becoming more insular and less outgoing over time. Yet, despite their apprehension leading up to on-campus classes and students' difficulty navigating the physical space, they did manage to adapt, and occasionally thrive.

In-person classes and tutorials pulled students back into the communal educational experience, which proved personally and academically beneficial. Within this context, students learnt from their classmates' contributions, all while broadening their understanding of and tolerance for alternative perspectives. This classroom environment produced greater engagement, as students saw their own anxieties mirrored in those around them it became easier to speak without fear of judgement. They could recognise that their apprehension was a part of the collective experience, as opposed to an individual pathology. As introverted students found it more difficult to reach out to other students and initiate connection, the structured university environment where participation was no longer an "option", but a requirement, helped them to become "comfortable being uncomfortable". It pushed them to leave their "comfort zones", despite the challenge this posed.

The infrastructure of the classroom involved both people and place. In 2022, had students found themselves in anonymous lecture halls of 200 students, and a campus at full capacity, their experience may have been different. As it happens, smaller classes as a COVID-19 safety precaution, and educator facilitated participation, created conditions for student engagement with their course content, educators, and each other.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

With the flow of time and the immediacy of present-day concerns – global and local, societal and personal – the COVID-19 pandemic has become a part of our history. After a painful, prolonged chapter, many wish to position the pandemic in the past and move forward; yet if we are too quick to forget, we risk losing all we have learnt. I maintain that pandemic-era experiences provide something quite unique, through societal upheaval we gained a heightened awareness of the lives we had formerly inhabited. The disruption of university education demonstrated what it had previously offered. The multi-layered nature of the university's infrastructure and the significance of student sociality, in all its forms, became "visible upon breakdown" (Latham & Layton 2019, 4).

Through participants' accounts, I found that the notion of the university as a space for exploration, for social connection across difference, and for an education that transcends the classroom to shape students' very characters, is alive and well. The online iterations of university education that students received, however, did not provide this university experience. Through the course of the pandemic, it became clear that this all-encompassing university education requires robust practical infrastructure that facilitates student learning and living; educational infrastructure that guides active student participation; and social infrastructure that encourages social engagement.

Reflecting on the versions of "the university" that developed from students' lived experiences, from early 2020 until mid-2022, each phase produced important insights. The university visible in 2020, as students first entered the University of the Witwatersrand, was the Liminal University. This university facilitated a holistic education, a loosely structured journey through personal and academic challenges balanced by a collective social experience. Apart from the physical and/or psychological separation from their prior identities, the Liminal University required a safe, resourced, social environment for students to effectively engage in this broad interpretation of university education.

The Liminal University was not replicated online, as it relied upon the physical university campus and student sociality to exist. As such, the Liminal University was replaced by the Remote University. Through its absence, the significance of the university campus and the resources it offered became blatantly clear. Despite the University of the Witwatersrand's efforts to provide electronic devices and internet connection to students in far-flung locations across the country, there were certain realities that could not be accounted for. In particular, disruptive home environments, faulty technology, and connection difficulties despite data provision, made it difficult for many students to fully engage in their online education.

During the first COVID-19 lockdown, students connected with one another online, sustaining the new friendships they had made on campus. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, "incidental biosociality" drew students together, as they processed the novel circumstances they found themselves in. This initial experience was largely collective, however, students' comradery tended to dissipate over time. When faced with competing socialities, relationships with in-person engagement and/or strong foundations, such as family and high school friends, proved more sustainable than new university connections tended to be. Although some online university relationships remained steady and supportive throughout the pandemic, many fizzled out, resulting in a "remote" university experience, in more ways than one. The Remote University demonstrates that social engagement does not automatically occur in online educational settings without creative facilitation, and even then, a sustained sense of student community requires at least some in-person interaction.

In 2021, as students' education continued online for another year, the Static University materialised. In their second year of remote learning, certain students returned to university residences while others remained at home. For those who remained at home, many felt an overwhelming sense of stagnation, a cessation of "growth". In addition, the infrastructure of online learning – in its efforts to offer an equal experience to all students regardless of material circumstances – created a largely asynchronous, individualised university experience with few opportunities for social engagement. Students depicted a life in greyscale, a sense of disconnection that evokes a static fuzziness as opposed to a sharp image or clear connection. For those who returned to residences, they regained the physical resources and stability necessary to engage in their work, yet the university's social infrastructure was missing. Although certain students managed to forge their own university communities, this occurred, not as a result of, but *despite* the social conditions of online learning. In contrast to the Liminal University, which is characterised by change, discomfort, connection and growth, the Static University proved "comfortable", yet bred discontent. Students' sense of inertia during 2021 highlights the importance of active participation within educational settings and the value of sociality as a motivational tool for academic engagement.

In 2022, as the academic year commenced with a partial return to campus for certain lectures and tutorials, the Static University was replaced by the Interpersonal University. Despite students' initial discomfort adapting to the campus space, smaller classes – implemented as a COVID-19 safety precaution – eased students' transition. Small classes were particularly appreciated by introverted students and those struggling to shift out of a prolonged state of isolated learning. In small, in-person classes, students could read body language; when other students spoke through their unease, their classmates felt encouraged to do the same. The creation of small groups for discussion within the classroom space also provided a "safe" setting where students could workshop their ideas before expressing them to a larger audience or through their assignments. When reflecting on 2022, students conveyed the importance of hearing different viewpoints and engaging in debate and discussion, which shows an interest in their subject matter that was far less pronounced prior to this point. When lectures were situated within interactive classroom spaces, as opposed to intimidating lecture halls or anonymous online platforms, students felt a greater sense of connection to their classmates, educators, and course content. The Interpersonal University emphasised the importance of social infrastructure within the educational environment, not only for the sake of community, student interaction, and motivation, but for the richer educational experience it fosters.

In each phase, the university experience was shaped by infrastructure and sociality, their absence and presence, as well as how they merged and overlapped. Each iteration of the university asserted the importance of infrastructure: on campus, in home spaces, within online platforms, at student residences, and inside classrooms. Within each of these spaces, I learnt that "infrastructure provides a landscape of affordances" (Goodyear 2021, 42) yet does not determine one specific course of action. As such, university infrastructure – both "the planned and the experienced" – needs to be carefully considered and actively reflected upon (Goodyear 2021, 42). Infrastructure is fluid, it shifts with time and human intervention, as "when classroom furniture is rearranged" (Goodyear 2021, 42). As such, it is important to understand how it functions through use, which involves an ongoing process of reflection and engagement with the Wits student population.

Sociality similarly affected how students navigated and experienced the different versions of university education they were confronted with. To begin, the promise of sociality acted as a motivational force; then, communitas began to bloom from collective experience; social disconnection led to demotivation; an asynchronous education bred feelings of isolation; social support encouraged resilience; discussion and debate revitalised academic interest; and finally, collective experience thawed internalised anxieties. As stated in my first ethnographic chapter: *The University Imagined & Encountered*, to students, sociality was not an afterthought, it was central to the university experience. This was plainly stated, by students, at every stage, but it was also evident in the stories students shared and the subtext beneath their individual narratives.

Looking forward, I suggest that if the University of the Witwatersrand hopes to continue in a blended format with online requirements, resource provision – technological and practical – on campus and in student residences is essential, in order for all students to fully participate. In South Africa, where uneven resource access and frequent power cuts are unavoidable realities, an equitable university experience across the student body is not possible without the physical university campus and student residences. With that said, through my research I found that limitations to student participation and interaction online reached beyond practical concerns and connection difficulties. The online learning space simply did not foster the same kind of interpersonal, engaged education that in-person classes could. I have shown that within the humanities, and the study of anthropology in particular, in-person, small-class interaction adds important dimensions to students' educational experience. Students build confidence through voicing their perspectives, learn from their classmates, gain an understanding of varying points of view, benefit from a group dynamic, and foster supportive relationships. Yet, it may not be wholly necessary for every university activity to take place in person. It is, however, important for the activities that do take place in person to encourage social engagement. When students and educators do meet for classes and tutorials, opportunities for both academic and informal connection are vital. As Klinenberg (2018, 18) states, "social infrastructure that promotes efficiency tends to discourage interaction and the formation of strong ties".

The importance of meaningful engagement is not limited to student interaction; I've found that students both appreciated and benefited from interacting with their lecturers. Although the tutor-student relationship is important, face time with lecturers who have a wealth of knowledge on a given subject is highly valuable. It is also, arguably, positive for lecturers to have this interaction with their students and learn from how each new cohort grapples with their course material. In this setting, "collaborative learning" can produce new insights for both student and teacher.

In their reflections, students expressed a need for "safe spaces" where they could meet – outside of the traditional arena of mental health support – to openly discuss university-related challenges. This type of facilitated connection may help students to, as Thando suggested, "move out of isolation". Considering that "universities across the world are facing rising rates of student mental ill-health disorders", resulting in calls for university campuses to become "health promoting environments" (Waddington 2021, 9; Okanagan Charter, 2015; Auerbach et al. 2018), I posit that it is worthwhile to explore new, university community-based approaches to student support. As I've found that voluntary participation, both online and in-person, can result in resistance, I suggest that "safe spaces" can be incorporated into the tutorial structure through tutor-facilitated check-ins, or student-led discussions, split into small groups. This can provide a foundation for students to connect through shared challenges and foster a sense of care for one another.

To conclude, I emphasise that students did mature during remote university education, gaining self-knowledge and an understanding of their own mental health, yet, this growth was concentrated inward. Despite stereotypes about youth absorption in online worlds, this cohort of students had little-to-no interest in transitioning through their university experience alone, behind a screen. I suggest that the notion of university education as all-encompassing, challenging yet guided, and inherently social, has continued value. With this in mind, I argue for an ongoing appreciation of the physical campus and all it offers within a South African setting; the continuation of in-person classes with small-group student interaction and lecturer engagement when possible, and an active reflection on the provision of social infrastructure and how it can encourage peer support and ignite the collective student experience.

Reference List

Barnett, Ronald. 2011. "The coming of the ecological university." *Oxford review of Education* 37, no. 4: 439-455. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2011.595550

Barnett, Ronald. 2011. "The idea of the university in the twenty-first century: Where's the imagination." *Journal of Higher Education* 1, no. 2: 88-94.

Beech, Nic. "Liminality and the practices of identity reconstruction." *Human relations* 64, no. 2 (2011): 285-302. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726710371235

Bielaczyc, Katerine. "Designing social infrastructure: Critical issues in creating learning environments with technology." *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 15, no. 3 (2006): 301-329.

Bornat, Joanna, Robert Perks, Paul Thompson, and Jan Walmsley, eds. *Oral history, health and welfare*. Psychology Press, 2000.

Buechner, Barton, John Dirkx, Zieva Dauber Konvisser, Deedee Myers, and Tzofnat Peleg-Baker. "From liminality to communitas: The collective dimensions of transformative learning." *Journal of Transformative Education* 18, no. 2 (2020): 87-113. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327809jls1503_1

Bullen, Mark. 1998. "Participation and critical thinking in online university distance education." *Journal of distance education* 13: 1-32.
https://www.ijede.ca/index.php/jde/article/download/140/394?inline=1

Bradley, Bridget. "From biosociality to biosolidarity: The looping effects of finding and forming social networks for body-focused repetitive behaviours." *Anthropology & Medicine* 28, no. 4 (2021): 543-557. https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2020.1864807

Carse, Ashley, and David Kneas. "Unbuilt and unfinished: The temporalities of infrastructure." *Environment and Society* 10, no. 1 (2019): 9-28. https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2019.100102

Chaney, Jen. *"Grown-ish* Still Has Some Growing to Do". Vulture. January 3, 2018. https://www.vulture.com/2018/01/grown-ish-freeform-review.html

Cooper, Robin. "Constructing belonging in a diverse campus community." *Journal of College and Character* 10, no. 3 (2009): 1-10. https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1085

Costa, Rosário Couto. "The place of the humanities in today's knowledge society." *Palgrave Communications* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1-5. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0245-6

Czerniewicz, Laura, Najma Agherdien, Johan Badenhorst, Dina Belluigi, Tracey Chambers, Muntuwenkosi Chili, Magriet De Villiers et al. "A wake-up call: Equity, inequality and Covid-19 emergency remote teaching and learning." *Postdigital science and education* 2, no. 3 (2020): 946-967. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00187-4

Dimond, Rebecca, Andrew Bartlett, and Jamie Lewis. "What binds biosociality? The collective effervescence of the parent-led conference." *Social Science & Medicine* 126 (2015): 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.12.005

Erasmus, Zimitri. "Learning with letters: epistolary pedagogy in anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand during the Covid-19 pandemic." *Anthropology Southern Africa* 44, no. 3 (2021): 123-137. https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2021.1974305

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Erichsen, Elizabeth A., and Doris U. Bolliger. "Towards understanding international graduate student isolation in traditional and online environments." *Educational Technology Research and Development* 59 (2011): 309-326. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-010-9161-6

Fataar, Aslam. "Placing students at the centre of the decolonizing education imperative: Engaging the (mis) recognition struggles of students at the postapartheid university." *Educational Studies* 54, no. 6 (2018): 595-608. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2018.1518231

Fouché, Ilse, and Grant Andrews. "Working from home is one major disaster": An analysis of student feedback at a South African university during the Covid-19 lockdown." *Education and Information Technologies* 27, no. 1 (2022): 133-155. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10652-7

Freire, Paulo. "Pedagogy of the oppressed." In *Toward a sociology of education*, 374-386. New York: Routledge, 2020.

Fuentes, Agustín. "A (bio) anthropological view of the Covid-19 era midstream: Beyond the infection." *Anthropology Now*12, no. 1 (2020): 24-32. https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2020.1760635

Gallegos, Martin I., Brittany Zaring-Hinkle, and James H. Bray. "COVID-19 pandemic stresses and relationships in college students." *Family Relations* 71, no. 1 (2022): 29-45. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12602

Ghodsee, Kristen. *From notes to narrative: Writing ethnographies that everyone can read*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Godsell, Gillian, Rekgotsofetse Chikane, and Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh. *Fees must fall: Student revolt, decolonisation and governance in South Africa*. New York: NYU Press, 2016.

Goodyear, Victoria A., Ian Boardley, Shin-Yi Chiou, Sally AM Fenton, Kyriaki Makopoulou, Afroditi Stathi, Gareth A. Wallis, Jet JCS Veldhuijzen van Zanten, and Janice L. Thompson. "Social media use informing behaviours related to physical activity, diet and quality of life during COVID-19: a mixed methods study." *BMC Public Health* 21 (2021): 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11398-0

Gqola, Pumla Dineo. *What is slavery to me?: Postcolonial/slave memory in post-apartheid South Africa*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.

Heller, Nathan. “The End of the English Major.” The New Yorker, February 27, 2023. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/the-end-of-the-english-major

Higgs, Philip. "The African renaissance and the transformation of the higher education curriculum in South Africa." *Africa Education Review* 13, no. 1 (2016): 87-101. https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2016.1186370

Hooks, Bell. *Teaching to transgress*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Hooks, Bell. Bone Black: Memories of girlhood. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.

Hoppers, Catherine A. "Centre for African renaissance studies, the academy, the state and civil society: Methodological implications of transdisciplinarity and the African perspective." *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* 1, no. 1 (2006): 33-52.

Jovchelovitch, Sandra. "Narrative, memory and social representations: A conversation between history and social psychology." *Integrative psychological and behavioral science*46 (2012): 440-456. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-012-9217-8

Kanno, Yasuko, and Bonny Norton. 2003. "Imagined communities and educational possibilities: Introduction." *Journal of language, identity, and education* 2, no. 4: 241-249. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327701JLIE0204_1

Klinenberg, Eric. *Palaces for the people: How social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization, and the decline of civic life*. Crown, 2018.

Larkin, Brian. "The politics and poetics of infrastructure." *Annual review of anthropology* 42 (2013): 327-343. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522

Latham, Alan, and Jack Layton. "Social infrastructure and the public life of cities: Studying urban sociality and public spaces." *Geography Compass* 13, no. 7 (2019): 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12444

Latham, Alan, and Jack Layton. "Social infrastructure: why it matters and how urban geographers might study it." *Urban Geography* 43, no. 5 (2022): 659-668. https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2021.2003609

Lanford, Michael. "John Henry Newman: The idea of a university." *The Literary Encyclopedia* (2019).

Le Grange, Lesley. "Could the Covid-19 pandemic accelerate the uberfication of the university?." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 4 (2020): 1-10. https://journals.co.za/doi/epdf/10.20853/34-4-4071

Lumumba-Kasongo, Tukumbi. "RECONSTRUCTING AFRICA: Reflections On The African Renaissance." *Black Renaissance* 4, no. 1 (2002): 110.

Malabela, Musawenkosi. "We are not violent but just demanding free decolonized education: University of the Witwatersrand." *Hashtag-Analysis of the# FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities* (2017): 132-148.

Mamdani, Mahmood. "University crisis and reform: A reflection on the African experience." *Review of African political economy* 20, no. 58 (1993): 7-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/03056249308704016

Mangcu, Xolela. "Shattering the myth of a post-racial consensus in South African higher education:“Rhodes Must Fall” and the struggle for transformation at the University of Cape Town." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5, no. 2 (2017): 243-266. https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.5.2.0243

Markham, Annette N. "Fieldwork in social media: What would Malinowski do?." *Qualitative Communication Research* 2, no. 4 (2013): 434-446.

Maunder, Rachel E., Matthew Cunliffe, Jessica Galvin, Sibulele Mjali, and Jenine Rogers. "Listening to student voices: Student researchers exploring undergraduate experiences of university transition." *Higher education* 66, no. 2 (2013): 139-152. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9595-3

Mbembe, Achille. "Decolonizing the university: New directions." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2016): 29-45.

Mncube, Vusi, Bonginkosi Hardy Mutongoza, and Emmanuel Olawale. "Managing higher education institutions in the context of COVID-19 stringency: Experiences of stakeholders at a rural South African university." *Perspectives in Education* 39, no. 1 (2021): 390-409. https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v39.i1.24

Moulder, James."" Africanising" our Universities: Some Ideas for a Debate." *Journal of constructive theology* 1, no. 1 (1995): 43-60.

Mseleku, Zethembe. "Youth high unemployment/unemployability in South Africa: the unemployed graduates' perspectives." *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 12, no. 4 (2022): 775-790.

Murray, Bruce. *WITS: The 'Open' Years: A History of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 1939-1959*. New York: NYU Press, 2022.

Nybom, Thorsten. "The Humboldt legacy: Reflections on the past, present, and future of the European university." *Higher Education Policy* 16, no. 2 (2003): 141-159.

Nyerere, Julius K. "Education for self-reliance." *CrossCurrents*18, no. 4 (1968): 415-434.

Oloukoï, Chrystel. "Precarious gentrification: Dreading the night while 'taking back the city' in Johannesburg." *Exploring Nightlife: Space, Society and Governance* (2018): 19-34.

Parsons, Michelle Anne. ""I miss my friends, but I also miss strangers": Pandemic loneliness and the importance of place and practice." *SSM-Mental Health* 2 (2022): 100121. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2022.100121

Phillips, Howard. "Review Article What did your University do during Apartheid?." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 1 (2000): 173-177. https://doi.org/10.1080/030570700108441

Pillay, Venitha, and Ke Yu. "The state of Humanities in post-apartheid South Africa-a quantitative story." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24, no. 4 (2010): 602-615. https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC37628

Portelli, Alessandro. *The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories: Form and meaning in oral history*. New York: *State University of New York Press*, 2010.

Pritchard, Rosalind. "Humboldtian values in a changing world: Staff and students in German universities." *Oxford review of education* 30, no. 4 (2004): 509-528. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498042000303982

Rabinow, Paul, Sahra Gibbon, and Carlos Novas. "Concept work." *Biosocialities, genetics and the social sciences: Making biologies and identities. New York: Routledge*, 2007.

Sá, Maria José, and Sandro Serpa. 2020. "The COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to foster the sustainable development of teaching in higher education." *Sustainability* 12, no. 20: 8525. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208525

Sandstrom, Gillian M., and Elizabeth W. Dunn. "Social interactions and well-being: The surprising power of weak ties." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, no. 7 (2014): 910-922. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167214529799

Santos, Jose Leonardo. "Teaching and Learning Anthropology in the Time of COVID-19." *Teaching and Learning Anthropology* 4, no. 1. (2021): 1-7. https://doi.org/10.5070/T34154172

Scutt, Cecily, and Julia Hobson. "The stories we need: Anthropology, philosophy, narrative and higher education research." *Higher Education Research & Development* 32, no. 1 (2013): 17-29. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.751088

Seabi, Joseph, Jaishika Seedat, Katijah Khoza-Shangase, and Lakeasha Sullivan. "Experiences of university students regarding transformation in South Africa." *International Journal of Educational Management* 28, no. 1 (2014): 66-81. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-01-2012-0017

Seepe, Sipho. "Indigenous knowledge systems can benefit everyone." *Mail and Guardian* 21 (2001). https://mg.co.za/article/2001-10-19-indigenous-knowledge-systems-can-benefit-everyone/

Simmel, Georg. "The stranger." *Urban culture: Critical concepts in literary and cultural studies* 3 (2004): 73.

Simone, AbdouMaliq. "People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg." *Public culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 407-429.

Star, Susan Leigh. "The ethnography of infrastructure." *American behavioral scientist* 43, no. 3 (1999): 377-391. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027649921955326

Trivedi, Jennifer. "Is This Still Triage? Or Are We Back to Teaching?." *Teaching and Learning Anthropology 4*, no. 1 (2021): 130-141. https://doi.org/10.5070/T34152267

Turner, Victor W. "Liminality and communitas." In *Ritual*, 169-187. New York: Routledge, 2017.

University of the Witwatersrand. "Fact & Figures 2021/2022."Accessed 10 February, 2023. https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/about-wits/documents/WITS%20Facts%20and%20Figures%202022%20Web-Ready.pdf.

Vandeyar, Saloshna. "Educational transmogrification: from panicgogy to pedagogy of compassion." *Teaching in Higher Education* (2021): 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1952568

Waddington, Kathryn. *Towards the Compassionate University*. London: Routledge, 2021.

Weiss, Robert S. *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

Wilhelm-Solomon, Matthew. "The city otherwise: The deferred emergency of occupation in inner-city Johannesburg." *Cultural Anthropology* 35, no. 3 (2020): 404-434. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca35.3.03

Yow, Valerie Raleigh. *Recording oral history: A guide for the humanities and social sciences*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.