



MUSINGS FROM THE REMISE; REFLECTIONS
FROM THE HOUSE BY THE LAKE
DEBORAH JAMES

Deborah James, born in 1954 in Johannesburg, South Africa, is a Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics. She started her lecturing career at the University of the Witwatersrand, moving to the LSE in 1998. Her research in the anthropology of economics explores how people's access to credit in South Africa is bound up with identity, status, and aspirations of upward mobility – as published in her book *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa* (Stanford University Press, 2015) – and how in the UK debt advisers/intermediaries seek novel resource flows, invent interventions, and create new spaces of justice. Her previous book *Gaining Ground? "Rights" and "Property" in South African Land Reform* (Routledge, 2007) shows how mutually constitutive discourses about the ownership, use, and governance of land reveal contradictory understandings of custom, community, and citizenship. Before that, she focused on ethnicity, migration, and musical performance: in *Songs of the Women Migrants* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), she explored how women migrants from the Northern Province defined themselves as ethnic subjects through musical performance. – Address: Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom. E-mail: d.a.james@lse.ac.uk.

My visit to Wiko was a matter of slow introductions. This gave me time for pleasurable anticipation, but even this could not prepare me for the joys of my stay. In the end, too, it was all the more appreciated for having had to be delayed by a year.

I first became aware of the Kolleg four years before my fellowship. It was at the same time that I first fell in love with Berlin. During an earlier visit to the city (in 2018), when

I spent two months at re:work, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, part of the “Freedom for Research in the Humanities” funding initiative run by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), I erroneously sent an email with a draft paper to the wrong mail group. This proved serendipitous. The paper was received and read by the Brazilian economist Lena Lavinas, a Wiko Fellow at the time. Her interest in the use of social welfare grants as debt collateral dovetailed with my own, and we arranged to meet at a bar in Schöneberg run by a fellow Brazilian. This proved to be the start of a long and productive academic connection. At that same bar, by happy coincidence, I also met Wiko’s Francisco Martinez Casas, who proved to be enormously friendly and helpful as I kept in touch with him over the next few years while preparing my Wiko application. Later during that same visit, I was invited for lunch at Wiko by the German anthropologist Carola Lentz, with whom I’d long been in communication. All of these encounters whetted my appetite. The long-term friendships I developed with these people were premonitions of the wonderfully fruitful relationships that became possible once my fellowship actually began (a year later than anticipated owing to delays resulting from the Covid pandemic).

My initial proposal centred on an anthropological exploration of the unexpected kinds of redistribution that operate through informal or semi-formal interventions. When I arrived, I had a vaguely defined idea about bringing together my fieldwork experiences and observations from two rather different field sites: South Africa and the UK. I sat in my office, reading through my own field notes and the books and articles procured for me by the library, and began to write a diary filled with musings. Punctuated with the usual anxieties about slow progress, and with (welcome) interruptions by Tuesday Colloquia, Three Cultures Forums, and choir practices, I made slow progress at first. Another hiatus came with a delay in getting our visa, but our enforced departure from Berlin in November proved serendipitous: it allowed me to spend a longer time than planned in South Africa as my 95-year-old father gradually slipped into decline. We returned to Berlin in January, and, sadly, he died in February: a heartbreaking event that recalled me once again to South Africa and which means that my Wiko memories will always have a bittersweet dimension.

My progress, despite these hiccups and sorrowful stoppages, stepped up as time went by. By the time I left, I had six chapters and a title – “Clawing back: a new anthropology of redistribution in precarious times.” The book manuscript (if that is what it turns out to be) drew much of its overarching framework from a review article, co-written with the

anthropologist Caitlin Zaloom of NYU during the first few months of my fellowship. Entitled “Financialization and the Household,” it challenges some prevalent – overly deterministic – anthropological approaches to the study of financialised processes. In these approaches, we found, binary thinking about the stark separation of commodified and non-commodity relationships is prevalent, market logics are seen to intrude in a one-way fashion into intimate family and social relations, and families are said to be disciplined to act in ways that reproduce the formalized demands of financial contracts. In the article, due to be published in 2023 in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, we offer an alternative view. We examine finance in practice and in place and investigate how financial demands are received, responded to, and transformed when incorporated into collective life, showing that finance does not seamlessly produce subjects who accede to its demands, but instead introduces tools with which householders pursue their own distinctive objectives.

Drawing on similar arguments, the book manuscript explores the varied and changing economic arrangements through which people have gained access to a livelihood. Addressing, and trying to make sense of, phenomena that have not often been seen as aligned with each other, it looks not only at questions of financial debt (the topic of my earlier research), but also those of work and welfare. The interlinking of these three areas became increasingly evident to me as I read through and tried to make sense of my field notes. In the process, I found myself investigating the nexus of relationships through which people relate to three sets of actors: the private or state institutions to which (or individuals to whom) they owe money; those who employ them and pay their remuneration; and the government agencies, non-governmental organisations, or charitable institutions through which they might expect social protection. My contribution to understanding redistribution is underpinned by an awareness of how the resources disbursed are not only those collected through taxation, but can include those assembled through less organised arrangements; that is, redistribution involves an interlocking of formal and informal processes. It can range from high-profile examples such as the shake-up of land ownership in the wake of political change, through less visible/obvious ones like the expansion of welfare payments, to frankly counterintuitive ones like extending credit to the poor.

I presented one of the chapters at the Humboldt-Universität (thanks to an invitation by former Wiko Fellow Alice von Bieberstein) and at the University of St. Gallen. Other matters occupied me too, especially over the first few months of the fellowship. I was involved in two publishing initiatives. One, following from a successful workshop held at

LSE in June 2022 that commemorated the centenary of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Bronisław Malinowski's influential founding text of economic anthropology, was the compiling of an edited volume, together with former Wiko Fellow Chris Hann. We submitted the manuscript, provisionally entitled *One Hundred Years of Argonauts: Malinowski, Ethnography and (Economic) Anthropology*, to Berghahn, and as I write this we have received three positive reviews. The other, an initiative together with a team of co-editors from France, China, Senegal, and Brazil, is a *Handbook on Debt*, to be published in 2024 by Routledge. Its authors include several Wiko Fellows, among them Lena Lavinias, Bruce Carruthers, and me.

Beyond enabling me to work on these focused projects and interests that I brought along with me, there is another fabulous feature of Wiko. Quite simply: it is situated in Berlin, and it is host to scholars not only from sites across the world but also, specifically, from Germany and surrounding countries. We found ourselves intrigued by the work of fellow Fellows on – for example – Martin Luther and the German Reformation, how and why a sense of “self” began to emerge in medieval times in the German-speaking territories, and how peasants on collective farms in Soviet Ukraine migrated to work in Siberia to supplement their incomes. And then there were the natural scientists, who challenged us by asking why we had found no laws of general application (other than that “everything is contingent”). An added bonus was that I became friends with an LSE colleague from a different department – we had to come all the way to Berlin to get acquainted!

Beyond Wiko itself, our fascination with the region extended to exploring the turbulent history of the divided city, visiting places like Majakowskiring in Pankow and the Waldsiedlung Wandlitz, where the DDR nomenklatura lived, and the Zentralfriedhof Friedrichsfelde with its *Gedenkstätte der Sozialisten*, where Luxemburg and Ulbricht lie incongruously side-by-side. We read Katja Hoyer's new book *Beyond the Wall*, as well as novels by Jenny Erpenbeck and Brigitte Reimann. Covering a much wider sweep of history, I also read Christopher Clark's *The Iron Kingdom* and Andrea Wulf's *Magnificent Rebels*. Being based in Central Europe for an extended period gave us the time, the curiosity, and the means to find out about a place (and its people) that, previously, had been largely unknown to us. And of course – thanks to Reinhard and Eva – there was (and is) the fascination of the language. All of this, for us so cruelly ripped away from the nurture of European membership by the idiocies of Brexit, provided a sort of balm.

Many of the things that made life so enjoyable – from delicious lunches and dinners, through movie nights on a Friday, through unforgettable opera experiences, through

convivial dinners with special friends, to regular beer sessions at Floh – have been noted by previous Fellows in earlier Yearbooks. But they are no less valuable for having been enjoyed by previous cohorts. The generosity and helpfulness of Wiko staff and officers, from the Rektorin all the way to the IT people, housekeeper, and kitchen team, was unparalleled: especially the way they made not only me, but also my husband Patrick feel welcome.

Living in the Remise next to the Library/Weiße Villa, via a last-minute change of arrangement, gave us everything we needed for a comfortable and happy residency. Learning of its spare room with grand piano proved an unexpected bonus. I spent ten months trying to learn jazz and working on some of the Goldberg Variations (I still haven't mastered Var 1, although I practised it about 3 times a week!). I have never lived closer to my office than I did during 2022/2023, when going to work was a matter of merely crossing the road. Returning now to an 80-km commute from Oxford to London is going to be hard to take. Likewise, I have never lived closer to the site of my daily exercise. Climbing over the fence at the Strandbad (which by November had been abandoned and which, we joked, had likely been a site for a money-laundering front), together with my intermittent partners in sport Claudia and Antonin, made daily swimming an easily achievable thing, albeit one that got increasingly cold as the winter wore on. Eventually I reverted to the gym room at the Villa Jaffé, until things warmed up in April.

One thing remains a puzzle. Why does the M19 bus stop at Rathenauplatz after 8 p.m. rather than bringing us back to Erdener Straße?