

Research Project

A South African social garden: people, plants and multispecies histories in the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden

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Project title A South African social garden: people, plants and multispecies histories in the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden

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Gardens and gardening are widely regarded as apolitical. Accordingly, garden historians have hardly written about politics, and social historians have rarely taken gardens and gardening into consideration. This is also the case with the 1913 established Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in South Africa. The existing literature treats politics primarily as context, but not as something that it was inherently part of. The dissertation argues that contrary to this perception, Kirstenbosch evolved embedded in political, social and economic processes. The perception as apolitical emerged partly as a result of its various political functions. Kirstenbosch and the subsequently established network of regional gardens functioned as sites in which nature and nation were defined in terms of each other. A striking continuity existed thereby of the institution's involvement in the production of ideas about nation, citizenship and belonging that stretches from the colonial to the apartheid and post-apartheid era. Following recent developments in critical plant studies, floriography studies and multispecies ethnography, the main question of the dissertation is how Kirstenbosch evolved as a social space. Throughout the dissertation I argue for an understanding of Kirstenbosch as an inherently social space. As a social space, it is shaped by social relationships among and between humans and non-humans, especially plants. Understanding it as a social space allows to critically engage the work of power in it. This understanding can serve as the basis for re-imagining Kirstenbosch as a medium in which multiple epistemologies and ontologies can take root that enable the development of more just and sustainable relationships among and between humans and non-humans. The dissertation is based on extensive archival research, oral history interviews and participant observations.

The dissertation was initially supervised by the late Prof. Dr. Patrick Harries. The main supervisor is currently Prof. Dr. Ciraj Rassool (University of the Western Cape) and the second supervisor is Prof. Dr. Julia Tischler (University of Basel).

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