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Martin Plaut on Dr Abdurahman and anti-racism in South Africa – a book discussion

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TRANSCRIPT

Martin Plaut: What I would just like to do is to thank all the relatives of Dr. Abdurahman who are here today, particularly because, you know, I really treasure your participation and I hope to goodness I have done a decent job because, you know, I really, really hope... I've worked hard on this, but he's not an easy person to write about, I mean, particularly because unfortunately a lot of his archive has been lost. And that does make it tough. So this is a view, mostly from published sources, other people's views, newspaper articles, the things that he wrote in his own newspaper that he ran, the APO, the African Peoples Organisation which he... African Political Organisation, which was the paper of his party. So there is something of him in here, but by no means enough and that is one of the great sadnesses of writing about Dr Abdurahman.

Anyway, before I go any further, I also must welcome Carien du Plessis with whom I wrote my last book and my greatest supporter and toughest critic, Andrew Whitehead, who was my former editor at the BBC, who is here and, oh my goodness, what will he say about me, I dare... I shudder to think. Anyway, I'm just going to now share the screen and if I can and get the PowerPoint going. Right here we are. I hope that's... is that working for everybody?

Okay, good. Right, here we are. Dr Abdurahman, South Africa's first elected politician, and I will try and get through this as fast as I can because there's quite a lot of slides. A very quick summary of who he was. Born in Wellington 1872, it's about an hour and a half, something like that, north of Cape Town, lovely little village. He lived in a poor part of the village, and he came from a Muslim family. He was the grandson of slaves, probably from India, at least is... on one side. But his family had done quite well. And by the time they moved to Cape Town, they were able to send him to Marist Brothers and then to a South African College School and you can actually see in that slide, you can see that is him sitting right at the back. He is one of the very few people of colour, ever allowed to go to the school. I actually went there too, briefly, for one year.

Um, he then goes to the University of Glasgow and studies medicine from 1888 to 1893 and he was by no means the first person of colour to come from South Africa to study at the University of Glasgow and at Scottish universities, there's a very strong connection between Scotland and South Africa and people of colour in South Africa who came and learned in Scotland. I mean, one of the greatest early South African missionaries and scholars and journalists, Tito Sawyer, was there from 1885 to 1850... 1855 to 1857 and Sawyer's son William was with Abdurahman at the same time. So you have a really rich relationship which goes through essentially the missionaries and I've provided quite a lot of reading that people can have a look at if they're interested in that.

Anyway, he doesn't just work, he meets this lovely woman Helen, always known as Nellie Potter, who was in the vicinity. He meets her and he marries her, and it was a brave move on her part because she became Muslim. Although she never changed her religion, but she was married under Muslim rights. He told her that she would probably face discrimination. Despite that, he was a handsome man, she decided to go with him to Cape Town and in 1902 they finally make the journey to Cape Town where they've been backwards and forwards and he establishes a practice.

He does extremely well and soon begins to be involved in politics. In 1904 he's elected to the city of Cape Town council, the first person of colour ever to be elected in South Africa. So don't believe this sort of suggesting that people could only vote in South Africa, if they were, you know, of colour from after the end of apartheid. From the 1830s right the way through until then the 1930s for nearly 100 hundred years, people of colour voted in the Cape Province. It was then actually stripped away from people, which is one of the worst parts of the racism that South Africa has faced.

And here we are, we have the register of members of the General Council of the University of Glasgow and you can see Abdurahman here. There he is, he graduates, his brother graduates some time later, and his daughter also graduates. All become doctors. So there's a really powerful link between the Abdurahman family and the University of Glasgow, one of which I think I'm sure you are proud of. Here we are. He remains on the city council for 36 years, defeated only once, to everybody's surprise. I think certainly to his own. He's then elected to the provincial council, one of the very few. I think there are only two or three that become elected like this.

He leads a delegation to India in 1925 and dies in 1940. So how does he manage to do all of this? To go back to this, I just want to go very briefly through the sort of history of South Africa. The discovery of gold and diamonds transforms the country. And here you see a picture of Market Square in Johannesburg. Within 10 years of its foundation, the discovery of gold, it was as large as Cape Town and, you know, a major city, so that the whole focus of tension in South Africa moved from the ports to the interior.

And the British, it didn't escape the notice of the British. War came to South Africa in the form of the Anglo Boer or South African war and I just put this up, apart from suggesting you should, of course, drink Nectar Tea, is this fantastic picture. You see just how many of these ships there were as they poured horses, artillery and troops through the Cape Town docks. Sometimes the docks were so full they had to double berth there to put two of the ships next to each other. It brought huge wealth to the town and this is a description of how it had been transformed from the sleepy town to this wonderful lofty buildings palatial houses and all the rest of it. This was a very much a propaganda booklet, but nonetheless accurate. That was a picture, by the way, of the Cape Town Parliament, which is still in use as the parliament in South Africa today.

The main street, that's actually Adderley street, you see it with the carriages and the lion's head in the background. And I think that's the Standard Bank actually. What you see in the gap in the left is where there is now a station. And that was the station then. This nice scene wouldn't disgrace any European city twice its size.

But there's another side to the city, which is the poverty that there was there as well. 170,000 people in 1904. And as you can see people came from all around the world, all sorts of people. They were the poor, the rich, Jewish secondhand dealers, restaurant owners from Madeira, prostitutes from St Helena and so forth and so on. As you see, the city is built around this parade. There's a fortress there. That is the parade and that is the really important place because that was where people used to go to buy vegetables, but also to demonstrate. And that's where people held many of the demonstrations. The Malay quarter is on this side of town, the eastern side of town. And just to use South African terminology, Abdurahman would have been called a coloured, a Cape coloured, at the time, and within that he would be in a subset, which was a Muslim group who were called the Malays, even though many of them didn't come from Malaysia.

Sorry. He built a house for himself and his wife, we got this made on the other side of town, Albert Lodge, which soon became a wonderful place where everybody of influence came and met whoever they were they'd come see him whether visitors from abroad, there were people who needed advice and he set up. That was where he was based. But District Six was also a place of great poverty. In 1901 these buildings housed terrible conditions. Many of the people... As you can see, this is a report, there was an outbreak of bubonic plague. And you can see the circumstances in which people lived, utter misery and I hope you can read what is on this slide, but it was just appalling. So you've got rich and poor living side by side, which was, of course, one of the reasons why the South African government eventually demolished District Six because they didn't like the fact that people of all races live there.

There's a close up of the parade. You can see how people are trading, but often they were a place of demonstration. The Anglo Boer War is often forgotten that it was a left wing cause. It received the backing of the left, including the Labour Party with Keir Hardy, who lost an election over it. We talk about stop the war demonstrations against the Iraq War. People forget that the first stop the war campaign was against the Anglo Boer War.

People of colour also fought on both sides in the war, but when the Treaty of Vereeniging was signed in 1902, and it was a treaty, it was not a surrender, it was essentially between only the whites and the Afrikaners extracted a lot from the British in order to have peace. Particularly, they insisted that they should decide what colour policy was in the country, once it got independence again. As I pointed out there, the people enfranchised as early as 1836, by 1904 they represent 3.7% of the population, nearly 15,000 voters and they are critical in at least five of the constituencies in the country. And of course, politicians, white politicians, took notice of them.

When he returns in 1902 he establishes his practice. He then gets involved in a school, one of the great passions of Dr. Abdurahman's life, and it's probably the thing he was best known for actually, is the many schools, both ordinary schools and Muslim schools, that he brought about. At this period, there were already political meetings going on just above District Six, a place called The Stone, anybody could attend on a Saturday or Sunday, and there will be discussions.

In September 1902 the African Political Organisation is founded and in 1904 Dr Abdurahman is elected to the City Council, despite the opposition of the left at the time. At that time, they had about 10,000 members. They were already a powerful organisation and the following year he's asked to become the leader of the organisation, which he does. And he leads it for the rest of his life until 1940.

He goes to London in 1906 leading a delegation from the APO precisely to call for the rights of coloured people not to be treated like Africans, because he thinks that in the wording of the Vereeniging Treaty that is this loophole, which talks about natives and, I mean, the terminology of the time, and Dr Abdurahman argues that coloured people are not, they had a European party and European heritage. It's rejected by London and from that moment onwards, he basically starts campaigning for everyone of colour. He realised that there's no hope of going down a separatist sort of coloured path and he fights for the rights of everybody.

By 1910 they have 10,000 members, a national network, but the great question they always have to ask themselves, they were still a minority in the country, who were their allies? Were their allies the different white parties or should they work with the African population? That was one of the problems they dealt with throughout the entire history, one they never really managed to successfully resolve. Here we have something that few people know about. There we are. Keir Hardie, leader of the Labour Party, on a round the world tour, goes to Cape Town, there he is in Cape Town, you can see him at the Socialist Federation and he goes there, having already been in the Transvaal. They had a terrible time. He was campaigning for nonracial unionisation and when he spoke in the Transvaal, he was so heckled, they literally thought they were going to storm the stage and throw him off, the white trade unionists. He flees from the hall taking with him the union jack which he hangs in his study, which is, in fact, just off Fleet Street in London and there you see him, but he was a powerful supporter of the nonracial position in South Africa.

After the war, Britain had really only one aim and that was to unite all the four colonies they now owned, to end the rift between Afrikaners and English and to bring the Transvaal, Orange Free State, Natal and the Cape together as the Union of South Africa, but there was always going to be a cost and the cost was going to be in terms of the black population.

So you get a series of letters which are written from the Cape Prime Minister, Merriman, to the Transvaal Leader of the youth ministry interior then, Smuts, and you can see there, Mr Merriman argues, God forbid I should advocate a general enfranchisement of the native barbarians! All I think is required for our safety is that we do not deny him the franchise on the count of colour. We can then snap our fingers at Exeter Hall, which was where the Aborigines Protection Society met, and Downing Street and experience teaches me that there's no surer bulwark for all the legitimate rights for any class or colour than representation in Parliament.

Smuts replies, we can't possibly do that because at the moment in the Transvaal, which he represented, any man who was white had the right to vote, as long as he was 18 and if they wanted to go to a situation where they'd be a franchise, which required people to have

either money or property, it would disenfranchise 10,000 bywoners, sub-farmers or squatters, and their grown-up sons of farmers and he says, we cannot do that.

And from his point of view, it was an unanswerable case. As a result, when the union of constitution is drawn up, Merriment extracts from Smuts the assurance that the Cape vote, which was a non racial vote, but one which you had to have property or money, would really be retained and that it would, but it would not extend to the rest of the country and Dr. Abdurahman, together with a whole group of other people, there you see WP Schreiner, there you see, he was a former Cape prime minister, that is Abdurahman, and the rest are both white, black and coloured people, come together for the very first time and they lobby London.

Unfortunately, London does not answer and does not accept it. The government was already involved in important debates about imperial defence. And since it was 1909 they already knew the First World War was coming. They knew it was vital that they brought other people in. So you see, New Zealand, Canada, as well as people, say, from the Transvaal, there, and the British did not grant the request that Schreiner and Abdurahman asked, that the right to vote should be extended to the whole country.

There, see this is a later imperial conference. There is Botha standing at the Imperial conference supporting the British position because he had fended off the right to vote. They were atrocious. Criticisms of Keir Hardie, you see here, hiding there, and there is Schreiner. I needn't read it out to you. But you see, the kind of abuse that he faced in the Johannesburg newspapers for the stand he took which was to give the right to vote to everybody.

One thing they did was to give a meal for the entire delegation led by Schreiner. There you see Abdurahman, Keir Hardie and the people who were going to lead the African National Congress, Rubusana, Jabavu. These people first get together in London. That's the beginning of it. Here we have 1910, sorry, we've got somebody's microphone on.

In 1910 the Union comes about and it is as Schreiner and Merriment agreed: only in the Cape people of colour have the vote. Great celebrations in Cape Town, Dr Abdurahman refused to join them. I'm afraid that was essentially the... there was a huge dividend for the British in as much as Botha joins the first world war on the side of the British and gets rid of German rule in South West Africa, Namibia and then goes on to fight in the rest of Africa, on behalf of Britain and in Europe as well. So it was a huge dividend for the British but the price was paid by people of colour.

After the First World War, the situation only gets worse, the politics moves frankly, ever towards the right and becomes even worse after 1922 when there's a massive strike on the Witwatersrand in the gold mines and literally, this was the closest South Africa's ever come to a revolution. It was only, you can see the troops were brought in from the rest of the country you can see aircraft and tanks were used to crush the miners and as a result, out of this came a pact government which brought the Labour Party and some of the Afrikaans far right parties together and the rights of people of colour were gradually eroded. Now Dr Abdurahman spent years fighting these trends. He got together with the people who

founded the ANC, he got together with other organisations. I mean, year after year, there were attempts to hold halted.

They never succeeded, and it was a great tragedy that he spent his whole, almost his whole life from the First World War, through to his death in 1940 trying to resist a trend that was inexorable. In 1925 he is asked to go to lead a delegation to India to fight for the rights of Indians who are coming under appalling pressure from the South African government. There you see him. You see his daughter Cissie Gool and Sarojini Naidu, who is possibly one of the greatest women who ever fought in the Indian drive for independence. I mean, Andy Whitehead knows a great deal more about it than I do, but she was an extraordinary woman, and he goes to India.

He meets the Viceroy he speaks on their behalf. And he goes and addresses the Indian Congress session in Kanpur in 1926 and makes an absolute impassioned speech, saying to the Indians: If only you had weapons and warships, we would drive these whites out of their rule, they would not be able to stand up to us, he nearly lost his position in the Provincial Council as a result.

One of the great successes that he had was his daughter Cissie Gool, who was an amazing woman. She was to the left of him, member of the Communist Party, fought using essentially the same tactics that he did, but she too, from 1938 until her death in 1951, was on the city council and a passionate advocate of non racialism.

He dies in 1940 and, quite frankly, his movement dies with him and that is perhaps one of the reasons why Dr Abdurahman is not remembered today in the way that other organisations and people are. This was a description of his funeral by a reporter at the time. The whole city came to a halt, thousands attended his funeral, and he was regarded as one... there was genuine grief throughout the country. There were even Smuts and Hertzog, who was the prime minister at the time, sent their condolences. Here we have a picture of Dr Abdurahman, towards the end of his life.

A man of huge achievement. Well, I think it's been sadly ignored, and I hope that this book will do something to redress the balance. I've put in the chat how you can get hold of it. If you're interested, anyway. There we are. That's me. The only thing I would like to do, if I might just, is to read you a, just get rid of this, what was said at the time of his death by the African Traders Union for the Cape Town area, he said, when he heard of his death, he said, his name is Leo Masholo, he said, I believe firmly as I express the feelings, the hopefulness a community of Native people when I say how deeply we feel the depth of the late Dr Abdurahman. Gone is the only man of colour, whom the natives look to as a real father, a true guide and a sincere member of the human family. South Africa, yes, black South Africa, has lost a pillar of justice and fair play, common sense and hope in the person of the late Dr.

That was Dr Abdurahman.

Alison Phipps: Thank you, Martin, very much and I'm just going to clap my hands and let you all put your own applause in the chat. And I just want to thank you for that really detailed historical overview. It really struck me as I was listening to you the depth of scholarship that

you've engaged in the struggle to actually remember someone who was forgotten with the movement dying, as you said, in 1940. But all the many different ways in which patterns that we see being repeated today, patterns of historical forgetting, patterns of imperial defence, patterns of voter suppression, patterns that we see around the desire to halt those who have genuinely engaged in the struggle for the rights of all from engaging in the rights of all, the way that those are being laid down in the story that you have told us of Dr. Abdurahman. And I think you've really shown the way in which stories get forgotten. They are so often told from the perspective of the victors. So within the South African struggle so much of the time we know when we hear about the people who from the Rivonia Trial onwards were part of the struggle with the ANC up to 1990 and obviously Mandela and the ANC and that movement over the last 20 years into the South Africa of today, but we don't hear about the people who may have struggled and failed, but have laid down really important lessons and ways of working and who were equally global figures. So I think you've really given us plenty to think about in that. I'm going to hand back to you, Martin, to introduce the music that I know my colleague Tawona is on standby ready to play for us, that I think is a really interesting piece that you've chosen as a little interlude between what you've just said before we move into some reflections and questions. So do you want to say something about the music that we're now going to hear?

Martin Plaut: Well, it's the music of the Cape Carnival. It's the music that people used to play. It's music of my youth and it's called Hier Kom Die Alabama, which is an extraordinary piece of music. Nobody really knows where it comes from. And it is sung even to this day and used in Cape Town and it actually welcomes a Southern American Civil War ship that arrived in Cape Town. Now why it's all been remembered, I've no idea. But it's a great piece of music. Anyway, I hope you enjoy.

Alison Phipps: Thank you, Tawona, do you want to play the music?

[music playing]

Alison Phipps: That's absolutely extraordinary! I was just seeing in the chat from Terry that she was saying that her parents used to speak about this or sing this in childhood and I was just thinking, I wish that I had had that rather than "And did those feet in ancient times". It just feels a little more uplifting. Just for those people who are just joining us right now, we've just been hearing from Martin. I know some folks are coming in a little later. Yes, we are recording this and the presentation will be available afterwards and Martin's generously made available various writings and documents that he has, as well as plugging his book, at the moment, but right now what I'd like to do rather than reflecting myself on the content of Martin's talk and presentation is actually hand over to my colleague Tawona Sitholé, a fellow Southern African, to really offer a perspective from listening to what Martin has been sharing with us and from the book. Tawona, over to you.

Tawona Sitholé: Thank you. Alison and Martin. Thank you so much. I know that you fitted quite a lot into that short space. I think this occasion is particularly special as well because we have family with us today. So I'm looking forward to the conversation as we go. I am quite struck, by this epic story that I'm sure for a lot of people who are unfamiliar with it are asking themselves why they don't know this story or more stories like this. So I think that

that is an acknowledgement to the work you have done to bring this story to light and I hope many people get hold of the book and manage to read it. I'm quite struck by the link between education and the fight for freedom. So this connection with us at University of Glasgow and that journey that, you know, going into education can build into the wider fight for freedom. So that's quite striking to me, the migration of people and what that means. And they know that the student movement is quite strong and has been for the last few years, there have been a lot of hotspots that students have really brought to light. And so, yeah, that is one observation that really caught me. And the movement of people, you know, it is, I think, for a lot of us imagining the journey that Dr Abdurahman made in the 19th century to Glasgow, you know, it's amazing to reflect on that and think, even now as we are in the current times how difficult it still is sometimes for people to make these journeys, so it's quite something. I am also struck, Martin, by the language. As your neighbour, as a Zimbabwean, I am... the word coloured is... It has a lot of history and connotations with it. And the fact that it is still in use today, I guess there's something about that, that we can maybe explore and see what that means now, overall, the system, but I'm also thinking about the treaties, the role of treaties in these journeys, the different parties and what their interests are and what their agendas are that lead us to arrive at certain treaties and why those treaties work for some or don't work for some, that's quite interesting to me, that the idea of the defence of the empire being much more important than the rights to vote. So the idea of war, I mean, we cannot escape the idea of wars and where we are still, I don't know how many conflicts are going on around the world, even now, as we speak, but you know we were always embroiled in these wars. So I guess, to just kind of, of course, we'll talk more, but I think that the last thing I just want to say, I enjoyed the presentation as well, because you put the songs in and you are reminding us that the human experience is still there in these struggles, because all these epic things that happened, somehow the family, of course it's a family story too, so the family were encountering and embracing or, you know, grappling with all these big issues throughout all this, but of course, the human side is there, you know, they're feeling, they're sensing, they are expressing a whole range of emotions and of course they are listening to the soundscape of the time. So it's a really... I think it's a really nice touch that you put the song to foreground this to remind us of that. So thank you.

Alison Phipps: Thanks Tawona.

Martin Plaut: Thank you very much. I mean the one thing that is difficult in all this is, you know, and the reason I highlighted the Boer War, was because it was such a kind of pivotal moment on which everything hang. Because it was the fact that although Britain put 155,000 troops into South Africa to try and crush 100,000 men, women, children, grannies, grandpas, everybody, not troops, 100,000 and after two and a half years they were still incapable of doing it, meant that it was a peace treaty, it was not a surrender. And that was why they were unable to dictate the terms to the Afrikaners and you know that 27,000 Boer women and children died in the concentration camps that the British ran. And one has to say there that probably more than that, black people died, or also their servants who were taken to the camps. We don't even know the number that died there. But the fact of this is at the end of the war, the women said to the men, who were still fighting, there were still 16,000 Afrikaners in the field, some of them dressed in sacks and with sores on their bodies from malnutrition, they said to them, if you decide to surrender and give up the struggle

now, stop the struggle, we accept that, but do not do it for us, we've suffered enough and we'll go on suffering if it's necessary, you can go on fighting. And that kind of... the reason I highlight that is because in a sense, if you look at the fury and the anger of the Afrikaners from that 1900 to I suppose 1990, for nearly 90 years it dominated and still in some ways dominates the kind of spirit of South Africa. If you look at the way in which some of the clashes that there have been in the last couple of weeks between on the streets of South Africa, about the deaths of some of the farmers, you know, it really in the end goes back to that anger about the way that they were treated. And somebody like Dr Abdurahman, who was immensely civilised, immensely generous, wide spirited, warm hearted person, found it incredibly difficult to come to terms with this powerful fury that they had to face. And I think that is why, to look back to that period, because everything sort of flows from there and it is almost like vengeance for what happened to them. It doesn't make it right or wrong. I mean, I would never say that anything you can't... That's just not the way to look at it, but it explains some of the things that are happening and the fact that South Africa is now, you can almost say, like an exploding society, if you look at how many people like for example, Willie Hendricksen, who's joined us here, You just live in South Africa, and I welcome him and, thank you for being with us. I think you live in America. Is that right, Willie? I think he does. You know, the Abdurahman family has been blown apart across the world, I live in London, and that is all... comes from this powerful force in a sense that rose... that came out of those events. And as you rightly says, you know, it is the victor who's remembered and in a sense it was both the Afrikaners parties and now the ANC who are remembered and nobody else is remembered. And then, I would just say one last thing and then perhaps we can widen it up. In my whole lifetime, there have only ever been two parties that run South Africa. First, the National Party and apartheid, then since '91 the ANC. That is not a democracy.

Alison Phipps: Thank you, Martin. Thank you. I'm just keeping an eye on my chat and messages and there's a lot of people thinking about the terminology we use around skin tone, the words we use to describe the colour of people's skin. Hugely contested and what Tawona was raising, what you've been speaking about and the question of blackness, of colouredness, of whiteness, but a lovely question here that's actually come from the family from Chandra, who is actually asking: I'm really curious to understand why grandpa is referred to as black. So Martin, a question from Chandra, and from the family and I think it's right on this topic at the moment that we're talking about.

Martin Plaut: It's a good question. I mean, what would you refer to Obama as? African American? Would you say that he was white? Would you say that he's coloured? What would you call him? I mean, frankly, I you know, I don't give a damn what people call me and I, you know, they can call me any anything they like. I think that the problem really is in South Africa that these terms, this terminology, which of course brought about by the apartheid system, is still in place, because the ANC insists that everybody still has to have a colour designation, because they say it's the only way we can make sure the people who were discriminated against in the past, now get a fair deal out of society. Other people like the Democratic Alliance say no, it's time to drop that and say we will help people based on need not on colour of their skin. This is a completely... These are two totally legitimate positions but they're two totally different ones. But this is precisely because colour is still such a vibrant and, frankly, I think terrible issue in South Africa to this day. That any, you

know, frankly, I worked in the BBC African service, which I loved doing for nearly 30 years and you know, we had arguments every single day, because that's what news is. News is an argument! Why did you put that headline? What a stupid way to write that story. You don't know what you're talking about. We wrote it two days ago. Why are you writing it now? That's news! It's always the discussions, the debate, it's conflict. At the end of the day, you go and have a drink, that's fine. Nobody ever said to me I said something because I was white. We protect each other. We said that somebody was bad because they didn't... because it wasn't... because we just disagreed with them, that's the way to go about things. I'm sorry, but if I did that in South Africa, it would just be hopeless. I mean, I would be called a racist after 10 seconds.

Walter: Martin, can I say something?

Alison Phipps: Yeah do come in, introduce yourself to us!

Walter: Martin, if you, you know, if we just change the way we think about the world and about people and we all you know on the planet earth there was life 1.0. We all are chemically evolved from the very first cell that started on the planet and through evolution of all the animal kingdoms right up to where we are today. You know, if we start from let's say Europe, all Europeans came from Africa 40,000 years ago. So all Europeans have black ancestry. So we are all black. And if we go one step further, we are all apes. If we go one step further, we are all ancient mammals and prior to ancient mammals we were ancient reptiles. Prior to ancient reptiles, we were ancient fish. Prior to ancient fish, we were those multicellular organisms. So we are all just one life form all the same DNA, there shouldn't be any such thing called race, you know, that shouldn't exist. We are all part of the same organism on this planet.

Martin Plaut: I completely agree. I mean, but I'm afraid the problem is that race is still a major category and it does inform the way people react and relate to each other and that's... It's a reality. There's no point in denying it. I mean, I think it's wrong, but you know I can't deny what what the reality there's around me, but I completely agree with you.

Walter: Yes, so. But the thing is, I think our education systems are really lacking and fail to inform the people on the planet. If everyone knew we all came from the very same little multicellular organisms we'll have respect for every life form on this planet, we will look after this planet, we will look after everyone else, you know, we can't differentiate. Everything is our cousin. The grass, the trees, everything living on this planet. We'll all relate to, we'll have respect for them, we will look after this world you know. It's science. It's about how do we educate everyone on the planet that we are all connected. We're all cousins, you know.

Alison Phipps: That's wonderful. And that kind of goes to the heart of much of what I know we are a tiny part of, within the work we do in the UNESCO chair, just really trying to think through, how is it that people construct conflict in their minds and what might be the ways in which we find routes to peace and what I was really taking from you, Martin, here was that this is a family story that you've told me it's a Glasgow story that you've told, it's a South African story that you've told it's a story about the Indian subcontinent that you've

told and it's a story about all kinds of different ways of categorising people and then trying to overcome those categories. And I wonder, I was wondering if I might ask you what for you was the biggest challenge in trying to write this book and piece together this story that was really, you know, as you said, died with the movement in 1940?

Martin Plaut: Well, the really the biggest problem was actually getting under the skin of Dr Abdurahman and his family when there's so little of the personal available. I think there are only two or three letters that one can read where you actually see what they really thought themselves. So you're always reading it backwards from other people's views which is completely unsatisfactory and I wish it wasn't necessary, you know, but it was the reality. The other thing that I think was really... I mean, let me just give you a couple of examples. His father was said to... and his mother were said to run a small greengrocers shop off the parade. I showed you a picture of the parade. Now, how the heck did they send two sons to Glasgow one son to... I think one son to Al Azhar University in Cairo. How did they afford all this? They didn't travel backwards and forwards to London. They established homes all over the world. How did they do it? I generally don't know. Dr. Abdurahman himself has two wives, he leaves Nelly, we don't even know the date on which he left her and he establishes another family. And we really don't know... there's a tremendous amount we don't know. So we know the public, we don't know the private and the private still is private, quite frankly, maybe that's good but I found it a gap. We found a few documents right at the end of my research, which were in the garage and I've got a few photocopies of those, scans. But, you know, there's so much still that needs to be done and to be absolutely honest with you, whether people like the term coloured or not, frankly, the coloured community that is a huge amount of historical work that needs to be done, to look at these people, their contribution to South Africa. They, you know, they are frequently now seen as only people who live in poverty and with gangs and violence and drugs. There's another story, which is about their strength, their vigour, the education that they had and the respect with which they should be held, and I think that that is what I was trying to contribute to as well to say, Listen, this is the, this book is by no means the end. And I hope that other people write a much better biography of Dr Abdurahmann, and go out and read biographies of other people of colour. Were they coloured, were they Indian, were they... You know, there is so much more work that needs doing.

Alison Phipps: Absolutely and what I'm really appreciating in the way that you've approached this Martin is the fact that you've really wanted to take a lost history or hidden history, but also one that is a history of, you know, as you said, struggle to his dying days. A struggle that began in a sort of movement to establish schools. And then that became a sort of schools-for-all movement, a movement to try and have treaties respected that then had to expand itself out. So a real sense of the, you use the term tactics there and it was really reminding me of some of the work of the self taught Michel de Certeau who talks about the difference between strategies and tactics. Strategies is what the victors have, as a kind of overview, and tactics and what you have to have on the ground to try and keep ducking and diving and dodging and working out what I route might be and in the biography you've presented the way that you've shown that you can really see that, but then these paradoxes that are so fascinating, which are these are gifts to historians and archivists to see what can be found about a story, as you say, which is how, how did this happen? How was it possible to have this many medical degrees from the University of Glasgow at that moment in

history? How is it possible to do this travel? How was it possible to do these missions? So I think there's lots there that is really fascinating me. In the chat there's been a couple more comments but also quite a lot of questioning around the categorising and maybe you can help us with this. The categorising of who was black and who was coloured and we've got some comments on the pencil test and whether you might actually be able to refer to that and enlighten us a bit more around that.

Martin Plaut: Well, I hate discussing these blooming categories that were related to apartheid, but they were real. I mean, I grew up with it all my life and the pencil test was an appalling test. How do you know that somebody is African as opposed to coloured? Coloured, you were supposed to be either Malay background, in other words, a slave brought from Indonesia or by the Dutch. Coloured were, you know, a mixture between a white settler and an African or a member of the Khoisan or Hottentot community. And one of the ways of doing it was the pencil test. So you put a pencil in somebody's hair. If it went into my hair, it would fall out. If it went into Tawona's hair, maybe it would stick. So on that basis, you'd decide that Tawona was an African or a native or whatever you wanted to say. I hate this bloody terminology and it would be decided that I was coloured or white. And that was the pencil test and every year under the apartheid system, one of the most disgusting things, they actually used to publish how many people this year are now going to be reclassified as coloured and how many people coloureds are going to become Indians and how many Indians are going to become coloured etc.

Alison Phipps: I entirely agree with you, and the way in which that this was then developed into illegal use around it, it reminded me of a moment in 2015 when the so called refugee crisis was becoming a thing in Europe and I suddenly got a phone call from one of the governments of The United Kingdom saying "we need someone who knows about refugees and who knows about semantics and linguistics to explain to us why suddenly nobody likes the language any longer". And it was a really interesting moment where I suddenly felt like I needed to give my 101 lecture on semantic shifts, which was really showing how at times of turbulence and at times of disputes, at times of conflict, the categories we normally use command a huge erasure as a popular movement and people genuinely want to shift and leave a language behind, a lot like the the renaming of street names after a revolution, and it's one of the signs that you've actually got something of a revolutionary moment happening, is when we say these categories don't work. We need other ones. And we're seeing it at this moment in time with things like you know a lot of people, placing acronyms like BAME under erasure or categories like refugee or asylum seeker or migrant under erasure trying to say there has to be a more humanising language that we can use. And I think, you know, just like you, Martin, I too weary of the debates around languages. I see language dissolve and flow and move into something else. I've just had a request from Mondro. Mondro, do you want to unmute yourself and ask your question or make your comments to Martin?

Mondro: Good day, can you guys hear me?

Alison Phipps: We can. Thank you. Yeah.

Mondro: Thank you very much. A very quick contribution from my side. Firstly, if just two very quick contributions on my side. The first one quickly, it would be around the term coloured and concept around the term coloured. I think... I'm a big fan of Steve Biko. Steve Biko speaks about the redefining of terms and even did this with the term black along with the likes of Malcolm X, who speak about... Biko himself even writes about how black is dehumanising but still reinforces the idea that one needs to attack colonialism at its very foundation and redefine it. So I think we need to acknowledge the fact that this term is very, very deeply rooted in our communities and then take it from there, allow the youth to create a proudly coloured narrative. The second quick contribution would be to Martin around... it was something just around clarity, a question around clarity, when he spoke about the doctor and only fighting for what is for [muffled] the coloured people and then later on, them choosing to fight for all African people in my strives of trying to better understand the coloured history, I think one of the things I've seen is that there's a huge tension between coloured and black people in South Africa. And I just want to ask how does that then contribute to the conversation because I think you mentioned the fact that, coloured people did not know whether they should side with the white people over the black people. So how does that add to the conversation of this tension that exists amongst black and coloured people?

Martin Plaut: Well, my own history comes from trying to reestablish the trade unions in the 1970s and 80s in South Africa. And I remember handing out leaflets to African people workers and getting abuse from the coloured population at factories, which were just, I tell you, I've never heard worse abuse of Africans then from coloured women, it was at the Irving and Johnson down at the docks. I mean, really unrepeatable, unrepeatable what they said. So, I mean, you know, that is certainly an issue. But at the end of the day, I think that there's so much more that we need to do to recognise our common humanity, which was the point that was made earlier. And I completely accept the role of the colonial powers in increasing the problems in this regard, but of course it wasn't only the colonial powers that began these issues, many of them go back, way beyond that period. Somebody was talking, I think it was Leslie, about the Camissa Museum and I don't know much about it. I have heard about it. But I mean, that sounds like a great initiative at the castle, which will look at the heritage of the coloured people, I mean, I don't like using these terms, but hey, you know, if they reflect reality one sometimes has to use them. Which is a pity, but what the heck can you do anyway? Sorry, I'm happy to answer any other questions, if there are.

Alison Phipps: If you've got questions do feel free to pop them in the chat and we'll bring you in or raise your hands. I know Gregory has his hand raised. Gregory, if you want to come in and unmute yourself and ask your question, but I was also appreciating your point about Critical Discourse Analysis and the need to both understand the way in which terms go under erasure, but also the need to really think critically about their usage as a way of hopefully preventing their re-usage in future. Though being mindful that that critical work can often lead to them being used again as we're seeing at this moment in time in some countries. So Gregory, do you want to come in?

Gregory Werner: Good afternoon, everybody. I'm Gregory from South Africa. I'm from a place called Bloemfontijn, center in South Africa and the community where I'm from is a coloured community and there is a street named after Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman, and

there's a couple of streets also named like Fredericks and we don't know who these people are and I'm so glad you highlighted these, there's not much we can find on Dr Abdullah Abdurahman and that's what actually drew me to this conversation. And what I want to find out is you might have touched on the subject, but Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman had close ties with Sol Plaatje and it happened around the era of the establishment of the ANC in 1912 in the center of the Free State and I sort of just wanted to know what was his role in the formation of the ANC? Reason being, I know, and I used to hear these stories from my grandmother. She used to tell me that you know the coloured people from Cape Town came up and there was a settlement in the so called black area called Cape States and these coloured people they didn't want to mix with the natives. They saw themselves in some other way and they sort of formed the group. And that's where Dr. Abdurahman came in and assisted this group of people to get an independent area which is now known as Heidedal. it used to be called Heatherdale, but the name somehow change to Heidedal to an Afrikaans name, so that all happened in the era of the establishment of the ANC and I sort of just wanted to know what was the role of Dr. Abdurahman in that era? And then the second question was Fredericks. There's another street name Fredericks and apparently there were ties between Fredericks and Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman. I don't know if he was the secretary general of the APO, that's what I suspect, if you maybe shed some light on that and I can't wait to buy the book.

Martin Plaut: I can't wait for you to buy it. Yes. Yes. Exactly. That's exactly what Fredericks was and he was actually, I think he's in one of those slides in going to London with Dr. Abdurahman, he's is there in the slide and the... Sorry you... the question you asked about, well, let me just throw one point. As I made clear Dr Abdurahman, before 1909, fights exclusively for coloured rights and tries to establish that as a category. Well, it's not surprising, that was who he was elected by. And if you look at the way that the ANC fought, the ANC fought for African rights. Gandhi fought for Indian rights in South Africa. That was just the way it was. They came together over particular campaigns. But Dr Abdurahman was no different from any of the other organisations in fighting for the rights of the people that he represented. It wasn't surprising, that was what his job was. Now he then, after 1910, he completely abandons that position and really fights for everybody of colour because he thought that was the only way of winning. And he always also made links to other... He will work with liberal, whites, he worked with anybody he could to try and stop what was going on in the country. And that I think is something one really needs to bear in mind. Sol Plaatje, Secretary General of the first secretary general of the ANC. He, I mean, I don't know if you know, but after 1912 when the ANC is founded, they actually come to Cape Town to begin negotiations with the government and they, at the same time, open negotiations with Dr Abdurahman, and they hold a meeting at which they decide, which is actually in Dr Abdurahman's surgery in Loop Street, and they discuss and they say, how can we work together, what can we do, and they agree there's a formal resolution, which says the ANC and the APO, Dr Abdurahman's organisation, will work closely together and we all fight and we'll campaign. Unfortunately, they never really, it never comes about. And it doesn't come about... I didn't think it didn't come about because of bad will on either side. But anybody who knows South Africa at all will know that it's a huge country, it's jolly difficult to get around, communications weren't great, a lot of these people were not rich and it was hard for them to keep, should we say, the dialogue going and they had their own campaigns they had to do, there were other priorities. I mean, goodness me, look what's happening in

Britain now with the Scottish Labour Party and the Labour Party in Wales. We can hardly, I mean, I'm a member of the Labour Party, and we can hardly keep our organisation together, that's one organisation! So, you know, I really do understand that these things are damn difficult to do, especially as you know people like Dr. Abdurahman also have to keep his... he was a doctor, he had a business to keep going, he had to look after his patients. So I don't blame anybody for failing. I think failure, you know, the great point is to try and they tried extremely well.

Alison Phipps: Yeah, thanks Martin, in this, in the different struggles that we have within our own work, we often have a bit of a mantra, which is there's no shame in defeat the way of recasting that sense of failure. But I'm actually really fascinated by something of what Gregory was saying, but also in what Loyiso Jaji was saying in the chat earlier, where she was talking about the K planes and the clinic that was named after Dr. Abdurahman, and just, you know, the street name there. And I think there's something really interesting for historiography. But when a history isn't told sometimes it emerges in really quite surprising places in the street names, in the clinic names, in the school names. And I remember a similar project that was being done around a little known poet in Germany. One of the ways into that was to then say, look, why is this grammar school named after this little known poet? And why is this pharmacy named after this little known poet? So I'm actually quite struck by the people who've come to this event, saying, well I live just down the road from a clinic named after him. Or I live on a street that's named after him. But I was wondering if I might bring you in, Terry, and if you'd like to speak because there's a lovely comment in the chat here where you're saying that your grandmother was Dr. Abdurahman's second wife, Margaret May Stansfield, and they had three children, Begum, Abdul and Neenam, do you want to unmute yourself and maybe say something about this? You're a bit shy! We're with you!

Terry: I just wanted to say that because it was mentioned he left his first wife, but then my grandmother wasn't mentioned and that most of us family who are here are from the second family. I mean, obviously, we had contact with the first family as we were growing up as kids, but I just wanted to make that point. And it's just, it's fantastic what's happening here today from a personal point of view, to learn this much more about my grandfather and it's just great. You know, my mom was only 14 when he died. So I don't think she had a great understanding of the history behind him. And I just want to make one point. You've used the word failure quite a lot. I don't see anything that my grandfather's or other people have done, who don't make it big, as failure because they are putting out, if you want to put it..., you know, ripples that touch people and what they give out then grows into bigger things. So I don't see it as failure. I see it as starting the process. So I'll just say that.

Martin Plaut: I don't disagree with you. And by the way, thank you everyone who has joined from the family. I've put my email in, if anybody wants to contact me. You're very welcome to. I mean, I'm not sure if I can find it, but there was, I mean, one of the reasons that I used the term failure is that I think, in reality, the doctor himself felt a sense of failure. And I say that because, you know, really, for the vast majority of his life or the majority of his life as a politician, he was struggling to just stop things getting worse. I mean, you know, the extraordinary thing was that in 1909, when they go to London and don't manage to get the boat, there was a promise from the British Government made by the Prime Minister,

that if anybody ever tried to get rid of them, the vote that people of colour had in South Africa, that the King would intervene. In 1936, when Africans were stripped of the vote, the king did not intervene. And the reason is long and complicated. In the end the king wasn't even informed that it happened at the time. So the reason was essentially that the Prime Minister, the South African Prime Minister, had managed to actually get a position where South Africa is essentially an independent country and they didn't refer to the king via the British Government, that's why. But let me just read to you what Dr Abdurahman said at his last conference in the APO in 1939. The age of chivalry, tolerance and kindness has passed away and an age of fear, of unreasoned suspicion and of blind prejudice with its deformed offspring of union of these two have usurped its place. True learning is in the course of liquidation. Fresh constructive farsighted and dispassionate thinking is in an awful discount and mere lip service is being paid to the great pure principles of love or distorted by racial bias. Its original purity and simplicity can no long be found or even recognised. That was his last conference. And I think that it's legitimate to say that somebody who uses those words at the end of a long and, you know, hard fought life recognises a sense of failure. I don't think of him as a failure in any shape, way or form. I think that he was a great person and somebody who contributed to our history and will be remembered and will be remembered much more powerfully in future. But I think he thought that he hadn't succeeded in halting, with the other people who opposed racism. I think he felt that he hadn't managed to do it. And I think that lived with him and he died with that sense of... And if you look at his face in that last ship image I showed him, it's of a man deeply lined, worn by years of fighting. And you know I have great empathy for the position that he was in. He believed in resistance, in a liberal democracy, he believed in non-racialism, he believed in the rights of all people and he believed that everybody was a value. But unfortunately, this time in which he lived was not sympathetic to that ethos and you mustn't forget the Gray Shirts, even to the right of the South African government were Neo Nazis who linked up with Hitler. That was what they looked to and you know that is, I'm afraid, the reality that South Africa has to remember. And I think it was something that lived with him, despite the fact that he had worked so hard against it.

Terry: That comment, just to let you know, wasn't a criticism of you I promise.

Martin Plaut: No no I understand!

Terry: It was just an observation.

Martin Plaut: Of course.

Alison Phipps: Terry thank you, thank you so much for that. I think it's really beautiful for us to hear from family members. And I think to just have a sense of, you know, as scholars, we, particularly in the arts and humanities, we are forever poking our noses into other people's business and digging around in archives and pulling out stories and trying to decide how to tell them or what to tell and it's a very similar thing, I know, with journalism and also with the arts of poetry and novelists and I think there's something really important about just trying to weigh these difficulties of, lives lived in struggle where the struggle seems to be forever and ever and ever without end. I'm really kind of touched by that image of the last one you showed Martin of this man worn down by the struggle but also how important it is

to hold that sense of failure and also that sense of defeat within a life that was clearly lived well within, what was it you said Martin, the great pure principles of love. And I've just seen in the chat that there's one more question. We've got a couple of minutes left. So I'm going to ask, is it William or Wilhelmina, I can't actually tell from your name? But if you want to unmute and comments and then we'll start to wrap this up for the end of the session.

William Hendrickse: Are you talking to me, William?

Alison Phipps: William, sorry! It looked like Wilhelmina on my chat.

William Hendrickse: I'm William Hendrickse. Abdullah's... I'm Terry's brother William, Abdullah's... one of his grandchildren. A couple of things: The person that I'm most in awe of is I think it's my great great grandfather, the slave who somehow got his freedom and really I think laid the foundation for everything. I don't know how he did it, sent his grandson to Hauser, and then my great grandfather to Scotland. That's a story that fascinates me. But I do think that my grandfather did feel failure because I've learned more today than I ever learned in my whole life. Because I can tell you my grandmother spoke almost nothing. And my mother spoke almost nothing throughout my whole life about my grandfather. And my family has almost told me very little about my grandfather and I'm extraordinarily grateful, I mean, extraordinary grateful to Martin for what he's done because he has resurrected grandfather's memory, more than any other person. More than anyone, I am 71, and I'm glad I mean, I never imagined anyone would have done this before I died and I have to just thank you. I told you this before, that this has happened before I passed and I just want to go on record and let my family know that we must be extraordinary grateful to you. Thank you very much.

Martin Plaut: Well, to be honest, I'm extremely grateful to to you, because you've cooperated and sent me a lot of photos and many of the photographs that we've used in the book are from your family and your family archive and I'm really grateful for the cooperation and collaboration and encouragement that you've given, because, you know, it's really hard to do this work without the family's help and I'm really, really grateful for what you...

William Hendrickse: I just have to warn you though there's great sensitivity in the family about all of this. And I'm not sure that you've heard the last you may hear some things from other members of family that there's, I regret there may be some things that other members of the family disagree with me.

Martin Plaut: But, I mean, you know, that is part of the journalistic or academic process is that people will criticise you, will debate with, will tell you that you're wrong. And believe me, there's nothing that your family can say about me that people haven't said in the past. I mean absolutely nothing.

William Hendrickse: I just want to let you know there's great sensitivity. There have been arguments in the family and anyway, enough said, thank you very much Martin.

Alison Phipps: William, thanks so much for those comments and Terry as well. And thank you for speaking with and from the family and I think you sound like you're describing everyone's family as a place where there's always huge disagreement about which version of the family story is the correct one. And, of course, that then goes to the heart of what the historical endeavour is about and

William Hendrickse: There's another branch of the family and that's the Hendrickse branch of the family that's also been involved with politics. So I'm extraordinarily divided on the Hendrickse branch of the family, the whole swimming thing that caused a lot of issues, divided issues, and the whole issue of black, coloured, It goes on.

Alison Phipps: And it is why those

William Hendrickse: You know what I'm talking about! Anyway, enough said, thank you.

Alison Phipps: Thank you, William. I'm going to move this to its end, because we're coming up to 3:30pm and I'm actually going to move it to its end. Again just thinking about that call to the great principles of love and with a thanks to Martin for the work he's done. But before I do that, I just like to invite Tawona to maybe respond with a poem.

Tawona Sitholé: Thank you. Yes. I think we are all really experiencing, witnessing, being part of something very, very special today and I want to thank the family for coming in and shedding more, you know, expressing what they're feeling about this. So I really am. And I'll say to Martin that hopefully this journey will.. there'll be many friends and there'll be many adversaries, shall we say, but you have seen what this has started the moment with someone having the street name next to them. And then now they're able to fill in that gap, this is all these moments, you know, we can take them away because at the moment we are in Scotland talking a lot about, or in the UK in general, about what public monuments or signs mean. You know there are all these conversations. Are they evidence of what happened, or are they... so there's all that to go. But yeah, I will just share a short poem, but I'll do a short song before I start the poem. The song I'm going to sing is about a traveler and the traveler is... there's a problem that the traveler has the greatest home. Because wherever they roam, they are welcomed and so the whole open world is their home in a way. So this is a song about the traveler, before I go into the poem. And I should not forget to thank everyone who's been present with us with the chat and even if you've not put anything in the chat, your presence has been very much welcome today.

[Tawona singing]

Deep in rhetoric
lies a hero with no impact,
no reputation,
no status,
a hero with no name.

Far from the limelight
in the blind spot of history

rests the hero,
the hero with no face,
no significance,
A hero with no fame.

Completely out of view
out of the camera shot
resides a hero with no relevance,
a hero with no acclaim.

Hidden behind the calendar is a day,
a day without a date,
without celebration,
without fun

A day for the hero.
Hero with no name.

Thank you.

Alison Phipps: Hekani! Thank you, thank you Tawona, for those words and it really just remains for me to say again a thanks to everyone who's worked very hard behind the scenes to put this event together. They don't just happen at the click of the zoom switch, so particularly to Bella and to Lauren, for the work they've done behind the scenes and the Equality and Diversity unit at the University of Glasgow that's been organising together with the Students Union and some of our events linked to the University of Glasgow for Black History Month. We are naming our newest building and largest building our after an African American born a slave, who was the first to gain an MD from the University of Glasgow and that story has begun to be told since 2014. But this story, the story that you have told today, Martin, of a hero, perhaps with no name or with a name that was forgotten in the 1940s, is one that you've brought back to the attention of the University of Glasgow, not least through the emails to myself and Ben white asking for access to our archives in the library and sharing with us a story of our home that we didn't know either. So we're immensely grateful to you from the institution for the work that you've done as a journalist and as a historian as a scholar and a researcher into the life of this extraordinary man. I think it is no accident that this is a moment in history when this is the life of a man that we need to sit with, linger with, whose words, we need to read and his legacy we need to think with. And so on behalf of the University of Glasgow, the UNESCO team at the University of Glasgow and everyone here, I just like to express my thanks to you, Martin, for your work and to assure everybody that the slides and the recording and details about how you can buy the book, how you can buy the book for your own libraries, those of you who are academics, how you can do that will all be shared both through the Eventbrite links that you've all signed up to but also on our website at the University of Glasgow. And I'm sure you can tell that Martin is a man of huge generosity, he's put a lot of blood and sweat and tears no doubt into this particular book as he does with so many other struggles around the world. And I know, Hyab Johannes is in the room here really in solidarity with your work with Eritrea as well. And we just want to thank you for that. And the way that you in some ways

embody that spirit of struggle without end. And those great pure principles of love that you've brought to bear with this work. So I'm going to let Tawona give us some music and play us out. Thank you very much!