

[0:00:00] Intro Music

Timothy Neale: Welcome to Technoscience. Podcast recorded at 2019 Society for the Social Studies of Science Annual Meeting in New Orleans. Produced by Timothy Neale

Laura Foster: and Laura Foster. This podcast is a new initiative to share the exciting work being done in Science and Technology Studies, or STS, with wider audiences who are curious about the field. It's here to offer an approachable way to learn more about this interdisciplinary and engaged field.

Timothy Neale: Before we begin, we would like to acknowledge that this podcast was recorded on unceded Indigenous land. We recognize the first peoples of Louisiana including the Chitimacha tribe, Coushatta Tribe, the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians, and the Tunica-Biloxi Indian Tribe.

[0:00:52] **Laura Foster:** In this podcast series, you'll hear interviews with STS scholars about a range of issues including what the field means to them, some of its big debates, and what its future yet might be.

Timothy Neale: To quote the feminist philosopher Donna Haraway, "Technology is not neutral. We are inside of what we make and it's inside of us. We're living in a world of connections and it matters which ones get made and unmade."

[0:01:17] **Laura Foster:** With those guiding words, let's go to this episode's interview.

Intro Music

[01:23] **Duygu Kaşdoğan:** Hello everyone, welcome to the Technoscience podcast! We are welcoming Lesley Green. Welcome, Lesley! Can you talk a little bit about yourself?

[01:33] Well, I come from the University of Cape Town where I head a research center called Environmental Humanities South with my colleague Frank Matose from sociology. So the two of us --- I'm officially in anthropology --- and we are working on what does it really mean to think environmentally in very different ways in the Global South.

[01:54] **Duygu Kaşdoğan:** And why did you become an academic? What do you think you would be doing, if you had not become an academic?

[02:00] I would be a sound engineer. There was a certain point in my career when I was working as a journalist and then I was involved in producing a radio series for Voice of America, strangely enough, and I loved it so much that I really, really, really wanted to get into sound engineering as a career, but there weren't any schools in sound engineering in South Africa at the time. So I was offered a place in a Master's program in Anthropology and I took it, and loved it. And that's how it carried out and I haven't stopped.

[02:35] **Duygu Kaşdoğan:** Then, how did you end up in STS?

[02:38] **Lesley Green:** How did I end up in STS? Well, that's a long story - how long do you have? OK, so, in the early 2000s I was working in Brazil on questions of indigenous knowledge, in what I thought would be a fairly straightforward project between archaeologists and indigenous people. The simple issue was to try to match the indigenous knowledge with the archaeological project. You know, I thought to my mind, how simple could it be, I thought that at most I would be working on that project for two or three years, but the book took me ten years to write. Because I had to unpack every aspect of modernist thought, in order to actually understand and resist a process of... we know, one thing leading to another, of realizing, well, actually this assumption doesn't work here, that assumption doesn't work here... So by the time I got halfway through the book and realized that, you know, the theorization personhood, of knowledge, of space and time, just had to be rethought.

[03:38] But around that same time... And you know that work was at Brazil, but of course I was teaching in South Africa, and that was at the height of the HIV/AIDS struggle, the struggle to get medication. Because our president, who was Thabo Mbeki at the time, was adamant that the only way to get transformation of knowledge was to switch from Western knowledge to African knowledge. And so therefore he sponsored a huge program for researching traditional plant medicine and was adamant that we had to not accept what he called the Western pharmaceutical solutions. He was suggesting, you know, lemon, garlic and olive oil and some traditional African medicines. Well, of course, there was a huge uprising nationally and determination to try and resist that kind of an approach and to say "Well, we must have science." So you know, that struggle was one and it was an extraordinary struggle, and the president was pushed out on that point, but what I was fascinated about at the time was that what I could say and think about indigenous knowledge in Brazil absolutely could not say or think about indigenous knowledge in South Africa. So that kind of said to me, well, the way of thinking about knowledge... You know, A) there is these very different regional debates going on and B) it says to me that there's something really problematic about the postcolonial idea, which mixed with postmodernism, which Mbeki was proposing, because what he was doing was not changing the structure of the chess board, it was simply swapping the sides of the players. So you know, not changing the structure of how we think about knowledge, but simply saying, well, African knowledge is good, Western knowledge is bad. And it was untenable and for me that was a really, really shocking moment, because it said to me that postcolonial ways of thinking and theorizing issues of indigenous knowledge were much more complicated and much more problematic than I had expected. So I started work around questions of the indigenous and then began to move around questions of ontology and I thought a graduate class

called "Tradition, Science, Environment" for a couple of years, where we tried to grapple with these things. And out of that project came the book "Contested Ecologies" and through that... You know, I invited Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Helen Verran, and David Turnbull, and others as well as our cohort of graduate students, thinking about indigenous knowledge questions where we could. So that project was the beginning of saying, let's think this differently, let's not just in terms of opposites and shifting, swapping the moralities, let's really think about how do we do knowledge. And in the course of that, it became very, very useful to work with the work of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, you know, *Cosmpolitics* and the idea of following concerns of how knowledge is being produced by virtue of the kinds of attention you are paying to particular kinds of things.

[06:40] So in that way we began to say, well, actually, there's a way of thinking about knowledge that doesn't solely rely on identity and beginning to recognize it... So the first thing is to say, you know, science and identity are entangled, but you can't make a decision on a virus and an antiretroviral on the basis of an identity. You know, there is a category mistake going on there. So it's not about switching from one to the other, but it is learning to ask much more subtle questions about how certain aspects of knowledge come to be produced and recognized and validated as knowledge. And then of course, there's another whole other side of that, which is that with the student uprisings in South Africa in the last couple of years, 2015-16-17, it really became clear to me the damage that has been done in that struggle of antiretrovirals because what had happened was that the way that it had been theorized, you know, trying to do science via identity issues, via the lens of identity... Again, I don't want to dismiss that, as I said, that is important. But it is not the whole picture. But having tried to do that, from government level, and you understand this is a post-apartheid state, and they really are trying to change the ways you are thinking, the way that knowledge has come. I mean, science was totally entangled with law throughout the colonial era, validating the logics and providing the evidence on terms of which the most unjust policies in the world were promulgated and accepted. So definitely we need to redo science and rethink science, rethink the political authority of science and the unquestionability of it.

[08:10] But the backlash of approaching science through that kind of postcolonial identity-based lens was that a really hardcore approach to science then was ascendant. You know, it was like "We have to push this relativism aside." Some of my colleagues and I took a huge amount of flak from really hardcore authoritarian approaches to science from various colleagues in the university. And we were accused of aiding in a genocide for trying to think about indigenous knowledge in different kinds of ways, and we were accused of being cultural relativists... Which was precisely what we were trying to get away from. But so hard that line was drawn, that it was virtually impossible to

think. But I think that the backlash of that was that such a hard-line approach to authoritarian, unquestioned science was instantiated in political life in South Africa that the work that we could've been able to do and that others could've been able to do in terms of thinking about decolonizing knowledge was set back almost a decade. And so when the issues on campus really came to a head and exploded not only in our campus in Cape Town, but many, many other campuses, I really, really felt the lack of STS in South Africa. There is virtually no science studies in South Africa at all, precisely because there is such a resistance to thinking critically and putting science in the social.

So, a long answer to your short question.

[09:40] **Duygu Kaşdoğan:** That's great! How do you introduce STS to the people outside of the field?

[09:45] **Lesley Green:** Let me talk to the issue of South Africa because that's what I know. I think that thinking around science with graduate students... Many are very angry --- and I'm talking about South Africa --- many are very angry at the political power that is exercised in the name of science. And of course bear in mind that I am talking about the environmental fields. You know, environmental sciences assume an authority in political life that really needs to be thought through, it needs to be part of a democratic process. But at the moment, the kind of thinking about science that's in public life, particularly about environment, from a government level, from an environmental management point of view, is very much, you know, "We've provided the data, now it just needs to be implemented." So there's a very hard experience that people have had, "These are the facts, now they need to be applied. We've done our studies, now you must do what we say." For example, that was the way that fisheries science was handling fishers and their struggle for fishing rights. Artisanal fishers were people of color and so there was a tremendous anger about that, so I think working with those kinds of situations and starting to unpack them differently, and helping students think through what was being going down, hone in on the works of colleagues in the sciences who are really trying to work with communities and are really trying to work with questions and address them differently, we can begin to open up science studies in different kinds of ways. And of course, there has been some extraordinary work done by colleagues in environmental geography and particular in human geography, who've worked with fishers and have really done incredibly innovative work in rethinking how environmental science has been done. But I think working with what students have experienced is the first step to opening up debates on campus.

And then of course with scientists, I think the work is to really point out that a hard, authoritarian approach to science actually works against conservation because people become deliberately and willfully non-compliant because they see this as an exercise of injustice. And that's often an entry point into saying, "OK, let's think a little about this differently. Let's try to think about this

together." But it's not easy, it's not always easy because the pressure on environmental scientists right now is huge and there's a huge pressure to produce quick solutions. So for example in the climate sciences it seems like a very quick solution to roll out GM seeds to small-scale farmers across Southern Africa or even across the continent. But what is not being seen in that kind of situations is... You know, forget the politics of gene editing and seeds, let's forget the policies of even glyphosate, you know, those are part of the picture, but that's not my immediate concern. What the climate scientist who says "This is an immediate solution to get drought-resistant seeds, we need it, we must roll it out," what they're not seeing is what's the social impact of that. And the social impact is that a farmer who shares seeds the following season, you know, harvests and collects seeds, and shares them, is criminalized. Now, in what sense is food production sustainable if farmers are going to be criminalized? You know, so the social system around GM seeds, the sociolegal system that comes in with this patented seed is inhuman and it will attack the backbone of rural life in Africa where seed sharing is an absolutely crucial part of socioeconomic systems.

[13:22] **Duygu Kaşdoğan:** You have already talked a bit about the STS discussions that have influenced your work, can you also tell a little bit about particular works that had an impact on your work?

[13:35] **Lesley Green:** What a lovely question! I mentioned Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers who have been key figures in saying "We need to rethink modernist thought" and I think that's the absolute key intervention. They're not saying "Western thought", because what do you mean by "Western thought"? They're saying "modernist thought", which is much more tangible and you can work with it as a set of propositions about the dualisms within society, the nature/society divide, the subject/object divide and so on. What I find so fascinating --- and there's a really, really interesting convergence between the sort of work that they are doing and many of the decolonial thinkers. And when I say "decolonial thinkers" I'm including Aimé Césaire who was writing in the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, and who was one of the teachers of Frantz Fanon, and Césaire was an extraordinary thinker who refused colonization and watched WW2 with amazement, saying that what Europe is doing in Europe and fighting over is what Europe has done in Africa and Latin America, and elsewhere for a very long time. He was really astonished and really deeply concerned of the effects of coloniality, of colonial experience on people and one of the key interventions that he was making was to say in his book *Discourse of Colonialism*, he wrote, "Colonization is thingification." Which I find completely fascinating that among other things, there's a convergence between that statement and the critique from Stengers and Latour and others of the subject/object divide. And saying that relationality is what's been lost in this imposition of modernist colonial thought. So Césaire is a key thinker. Other thinkers that have been very helpful are Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, his book *The Great*

Derangement, and more recently I've been reading Bernard Stiegler's book, *The Neganthropocene*, which is a fascinating text in terms of saying how do we unmake this Anthropocene, and part of that is unmaking the knowledge system that brought it to us, which is the knowledge economy, and what that does to data and the production of data.

[15:32] **Duygu Kaşdoğan:** That's great! I also love this work a lot. Thank you, Lesley, for joining us!

[15:36] **Lesley Green:** Huge pleasure! Thank you so much!

Music outro

[21:16] **Laura Foster:** You've been listening to Technoscience - a podcast recorded at the 2019 Society for Social Studies of Science Annual Meeting in New Orleans. And produced by Laura Foster

[21:26] **Timothy Neale:** and Timothy Neale in association with the Society and with support from Alison Kenner, Teresa Hoard-Jackson, Aadita Chaudhury, Konstantin Georgiev, Juan Francisco Salazar, and Duygu Kasdogan. The intro and outro music is by the Young Fellaz Brass Band from New Orleans, Louisiana. Find them on Instagram and gmail @youngfellazbrassband. That's Fellaz with a Z.

[21:49] **Laura Foster:** Thanks for listening and catch you soon for the next episode.