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Part I:
South African Debates: Responses

Response to Ramoupi and Worger in *Ufahamu* 38:1¹

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(Sekiba Lekgoathi, HOD; Clive Glaser; Peter
Delius; Prinisha Badassy; Noor Nieftagodien;
Mucha Musemwa; Michelle Hay; Andrew
Macdonald; Maria Suriano; Stacey Sommerdyk)

The recent article written by William Worger, ‘The Tricameral Academy: Personal Reflections on Universities and History Departments in “Post-Apartheid” South Africa,’ and the accompanying opinion piece by Neo Ramoupi, ‘African Research and Scholarship: 20 Years of Lost Opportunities to Transform Higher Education in South Africa,’ in *Ufahamu* 38 (1), crudely misrepresents the Wits History department.

First of all, we have to acknowledge that transformation is a national imperative, and that the transformation of the Higher Education sector (Wits included) remains a huge challenge in South Africa. The discussion and implementation of transformation is an ongoing process and we are constantly reviewing our own progress and engaging in critical self-reflection and introspection. It was out of the recognition of transformation as a constitutional requirement that the Transformation Office was established at Wits University more than a dozen years ago. In addition, transformation committees were constituted in the Faculty of Humanities as well as in its various schools, precisely to begin to address issues of staff equity and transformation of the curriculum within and across disciplines to mainstream a focus on Africa in relation to world history.

This being said, we are concerned that the critiques of our department were dismissive and ill-informed leading us to treat the remainder of their material with caution. We do not feel qualified to respond to the accusations made against the UCT history department (that should be left to someone closer to the action) but we think it is necessary to respond and put on record a few facts about our own department. We might add that we welcome

criticism of what we teach and how we teach and we think that this should be done based on clear evidence open to scrutiny by anyone who wishes to.

If you include the associated History Workshop, four out of nine members of our department are black (two of whom are, to use the apartheid category, 'African'). One is the current Head of Department. Although we do not yet have a black full professor, three members of our department are established associate professors, who, we expect, will become full professors in the next few years. Two of them are also South Africans who have completed at least part of their training at Wits.

Considering that just fifteen years ago this department was completely white and overwhelmingly male when the first black academic was appointed on a tenured position, this level of demographic shift is quite remarkable. It is also now a relatively young department in the process of rebuilding. While we recognise that we have made significant progress, the reality is that black academics are still a minority in the department. We are committed to making our department representative of our South African and African realities, and recognize there is a clear link between demographic transformation and curriculum transformation. Our department is predominantly South Africanist in composition and we know it could derive some benefits from being more Africanist and internationalist in its orientation.

There can be no doubt that changes in the racial demographics of the academic staff remains absolutely important, but is only one dimension of transformation. Another is gender. A long history of the History Department will show that it had not been very accommodating of women but in recent years there has been a radical shift from that position. We have made a concerted effort to recruit young female academics, and already there have been very positive spinoffs which are reflected in the diversity of new courses taught. Crucially, gender increasingly features as a central theme in our courses with historical examples and experiences drawn from the African continent, at large.

Regarding our curriculum, since the early 1980s the department has run a cutting-edge course on Sub-Saharan Africa at second and third year level. It includes sections on pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa and, although South African history is taught in other courses, it is integrated into the regional

story. This course was in fact offered as a full sub-major in the 1980s but has been cut back to a single module, not, as you might imagine, because of Eurocentric attitudes, but because of insufficient interest from undergraduate students. (This was a great disappointment during the 1990s.) Aside from this course, a quarter of our first year offering on global history has, for many years, focused on Africa and its interaction with, and influence on, world history. At third year level we have a well-established course on the History of the African City. (It focuses mostly on Africa beyond South Africa, but includes case studies from South Africa in discussions about urbanisation and urban forms.) The History Department, in collaboration with the Politics Department, offers a full joint major in African studies. In addition, we offer a semester course on the Social History of Technology where half of the material focuses directly on Africa (from the Palaeolithic to the 20th century). Our South African history courses at first and third year levels are constantly updating to draw on the most recent literature. We also offer Honours-level options on South African history, African American history, and the Environmental History of Africa.

In the sphere of postgraduate teaching, we have produced many successful black PhDs over the last fifteen years. Some come from the wider region and have returned to greater seniority at their home institutions. Two came from Kenya, one from Swaziland and two from Zimbabwe. Another Zimbabwean is in the process of submitting. A Mozambican is in mid-doctorate and we have new PhD students from Swaziland and Malawi. Two of our black South African PhD recipients are major players in the heritage world. Another, as mentioned above, has gone on to head up the NRF Chair based at the Wits History Workshop.

Having said the above, we recognise that we need a different and more substantial engagement with scholars on the continent. We are presently engaged in further discussions with historians from some universities in Egypt, Kenya, Mozambique, Ghana, Swaziland and Zimbabwe around developing lasting partnerships that would involve staff and student exchanges that would be mutually beneficial. In fact, one of our black staff members has been involved for the past three years in a joint project involving the universities of Wits, Pretoria, Zambia, Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe, in which they have been offering workshops to

Masters and Doctoral students on how to write dissertation proposals, do fieldwork research, etc.

In closing, we accept that transformation is a complex and challenging process that requires rigorous debate and engagement. If you look around the world-over, including in some well-known universities in the US, History Departments are dogged by issues of transformation, lack of, or delayed tenure mostly for African-American faculty and student numbers in History are much lower now than they have ever been and the slow rate of doctoral dissertation completion a cause for concern. Without being defensive of the strides we have made, we continue to strive for total transformation and equity for as long as resources allow and opportunities to do this open up. It will also be instructive to bear in mind the funding problems affecting university students (mostly black) and what implications that has for transformation from departments upwards.

Thus, while we agree that it is important to continue the discussion on transformation, it is essential that we proceed from a basis of fact and substance rather than anecdote and innuendo. Poor research is disingenuous and a sign of poor scholarship. *If either of you would be interested in doing research on the complexities of teaching history at a South African university we would be very happy to assist in whatever way we can.*²

Notes

¹ This is an updated version of “Response to Ramoupi and Worger in *Ufahamu* 38:1.” The original version was received on March 26, 2015. This version was created after WITS Department of History received Ramoupi and Worger’s response, which was done on May 12, 2015, to their response as a courtesy and they updated their response and sent it back to our editorial board on May 21, 2015.

² This line has been italicized as it did not appear in the original document the WITS Department of History submitted on March 26, 2015 to *Ufahamu*. Thus, it was not in the letter Ramoupi and Worger originally responded to on May 12, 2015.