Members of the University Sports South Africa (USSA) delegation: Head of Sport of University of the Western Cape, Ms Ilhaam Groenewald and Rhodes University Head of Sport, Mr Mandla Gagayi in Kazan, Russia.
“We live in a time of very, very serious challenges for South African women that need far more honest engagement about where we find ourselves. We are celebrating National Women’s Day yet I stand here with an incredibly deep sense of discomfort,” said Ms Nomboniso Gasa, the keynote speaker at the WASA Roundtable, hosted by Rhodes University in the Council Chambers on 9 August.

Ms Gasa, who is a researcher, analyst and public speaker on gender politics, leadership and culture, addressed the audience of mainly young black women and many of the young black women postgraduates and academics who packed the Council Chambers to capacity.

The day’s programme titled *Beyond the 50/50 Ideal: Gender, Political Culture, and University Transformation*, featured presentations from a powerful lineup of South African women academics invited by the Women’s Academic Solidarity Association (WASA). Established by women academics at Rhodes in 2004, WASA plays a leading role in empowering women in higher education.

The Roundtable also included the announcement of a book to be published next year titled *Mini Skirts and Full Panties: Limits to Gender Transformation in South African Public Culture*.

“We live in a society that emphasises the glorious liberation achievements and acts of courage and bravery in the pursuit of freedom, yet we fail to look at the blind spots,” said Ms Gasa. “We fail to confront the reality that South African women and women all over Africa continue to be violated and unrecognised in so-called liberated societies.

“In this year, which marks 100 years of the 1913 Native Land Act, we ought to be widely celebrating the women’s march of 1913 when Black South African women resisted the pass laws and opposed the Native Land Act, which was devastating to them in terms of their rights to hold property. Yet very little has been said about this.”

Added to this is that women continue to suffer ongoing dispossession and abuse through current legislation such as the Traditional Courts Bill.

She attributes the selective struggle focus and uncritical assessment of the past to the entrenchment of perceptions that to be critical “would be to betray the generations that have gone before us”.

“But,” she emphasised, “I want to suggest that the opposite is true. To be uncritical is to betray those generations; to not look for the weeds in the already ploughed grounds is a betrayal of their legacy, and the whole country ought to be having this discussion.

“We need to look at where we have failed in the last 19 years. We need to question why women continue to be treated as impostors and feel that we are impostors in all parts of society.”

In higher education, she continued, we aspire to the 50/50 gender equity statistic, “but we need to go beyond statistics to reflect on issues such as who it is that holds the dominant narrative and how does that narrative silence other narratives?”

“What kind of research archives do we have and how reflective of women are they? We need to question the very epistemologies on which we rely and how they continue to inform public memory and scholarship. If we do not do this we will not come to terms with the fact that in our history and in our archives and in almost everything that is written, women’s voices are silent or muted.”

She described how she had the privilege of asking Madiba about why in Long Walk to Freedom he omitted the role women played in risking their lives for their convictions in 1913. When she suggested to Madiba that there should have at least been a reference or footnote to this he had responded that she should not be so aggressive.

“As a woman and a feminist I need to ask these questions that are not being asked and to call for an examination of our past and present to distinguish which part is black, which part is female and which part is political,” she said.

“If we look at women today, we are being oppressed, raped and violated, yet our patriarchal society turns this on women and polices women about why they were in a particular place when they were violated and whether they were wearing a mini skirt.”

In the academic space women are subjugated in a different way, she continued. “Black women, as many of the young black women postgraduates and academics have shared with us today, are still bearing the brunt of an environment that in many cases still continues to question whether women are worthy to be in this space or not.

“There are still senior academics at institutions throughout South Africa who treat young black women as not up to the required intellectual rigour or who treat black women who marry or want to have a family as unreliable.

“We need to talk about these experiences, and challenge the injustices and contradictions,” she urged. “Because it is only when we challenge the spoken and unspoken legacies and prejudices with which we live that we can enter a new era of innovation and imagination in our country.”
Women’s Association bolsters women’s achievement

Ms Babalwa Magoqwana, lecturer in Rhodes University’s Sociology Department, joined the Women’s Academic Solidarity Association (WASA) in 2006 as an Honours student at Rhodes University. She was encouraged to attend a meeting of the Association by her supervisor, former senior lecturer in the Sociology Department at Rhodes University, Darlene Miller.

“I was very interested in the issues they were talking about, many of them critical issues that are not regularly addressed in the university environment. I was very excited to see this energetic bunch of women who were motivating each other to succeed,” she said.

The encouragement she received from Miller and other group members helped her to overcome an initial feeling of inadequacy as a junior academic.

“It was an entirely new experience being around women who were completing their PhDs and sharing the realities of their work in the university. As an Honours student I had not been around such people.”

“The space was less intimidating and actually very encouraging and WASA’s objectives made me feel like I mattered,” Ms Magoqwana said, describing the personalities of the women involved as “gentle yet bold”.

She hadn’t considered herself academic material, but her involvement with the Association encouraged her to pursue further postgraduate studies. Today, she attributes a large degree of her success in academia to that involvement.

“We need more WASAs in more universities. Having women sharing their experiences allows you to confront the realities of gender dynamics, motivate each other in your studies, pursue promotions, train each other, and develop the confidence to talk.”

“Without the mentorship I received and the encouragement to see myself as a PhD student and academic, I would not have gotten where I am today. It boosts your self-confidence and you see the socio-cultural space of the university differently.”

“It is easier to build social networks and get advice on presentations of papers, and you draw on the experience of the other members.”

Ms Magoqwana is a member of the Mellon Kresge Development programme, and lectures in the advanced sociology of work, sociology of labour markets and work organisation in the Sociology Department at Rhodes University. Before starting a PhD at Rhodes University in Industrial Sociology, she lectured at the University of the Free State (Qwaqwa Campus) for a year and then travelled to Europe.

Her PhD is on local government restructuring in the Johannesburg municipality, focusing on labour.

A whole new way to think about life

Ms Corinne Knowles, Extended Studies Unit lecturer and reporting officer for the Women’s Academic Solidarity Association (WASA) began her involvement with it in 2003 after attending a public lecture.

“This vibrant bunch of women were talking and laughing in a group, and they engaged with the lecture and with each other in a way that was energetic and creative. I can remember thinking, ’I want to be them!’,” she said.

She found out who the women were and offered her assistance with proposal writing for the Association’s earliest fundraising efforts with the Andrew Mellon Foundation. At the time Knowles worked in the Development Office, fundraising for faculty projects.

At first, the Association provided Knowles with new friends — “women who were intellectual yet passionate, thoughtful yet light-hearted, critical yet caring” — and then with a space to explore ideas.

“Although WASArians were not necessarily in agreement about what version of feminism it was, WASA was a space where we could discuss our ideas and perceptions about who we were, who we wanted to become, and how this could be hindered or supported by particular practices at Rhodes,” she said.

The introduction to feminist theory had given her a “whole new way to think about life”.

Early on, the Association encouraged Knowles to shift her perceptions from seeing herself as a university administrator to being an academic.

In 2009 she acquired a teaching job in the Extended Studies Department and completed her Master’s degree two years later.

“I have not stopped,” she said of her determination to complete her Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education, in order to start her PhD next year.

At times over the years, WASA members have worked together on important processes, sometimes gathering for hours over weekends to do so.

Such instances include a submission on the issue of housing to the housing working group; a promotions workshop culminating in recommendations to the committee; and scrutinising all policies and practices for a comprehensive submission to the National Task Team on Transformation, led by Crane Soudien.

“These issue-driven processes are important opportunities to discover together how the institution and society works, and in what ways we can support each other to access what we need from the institution and from ourselves,” she said.

Ms Knowles has served on the committee on and off since 2006 as ad hoc member, treasurer, and chair. She currently serves as the Association’s reporting officer to the Andrew Mellon Foundation, which has funded the organisation since 2006.

“Being involved in the WASA committee has been inspiring, although exhausting at times, as we have strategised together how best to uplift and inspire and support women academically.”

For her, the Association continues to be an exciting space for sharing ideas and hearing different voices. She continues to be blown away by the way the organisation can work together, provide different platforms and continue to inspire women of all ages in the institution.

“Without the inspiration of WASA women — their vibrancy, their ideas, their way of tackling difficult issues — I might have had a far less engaged and happy life at Rhodes,” she said.
As a dynamic Drama practitioner, Ms Alex Sutherland is perfectly au fait with pushing the boundaries beyond what’s comfortable. Her innovative combination of practice and community engagement is marking her as a forerunner at Rhodes. It is this for which she received the VC’s Distinguished Teacher’s Award for Community Engagement last year.

Ms Sutherland works with youth at risk and offenders from a medium security prison, as well as the maximum security division of a psychiatric hospital. She also develops street theatre youth projects commissioned by the National Arts Festival and theatre and science projects exploring notions of gender in relation to HIV/AIDS.

“Getting to each other physically is not hard. Reaching out across what we perceive as barriers, often framed in differences in language and background, requires courage.”

“My work relies on three-dimensionality,” she says. “Why is it that the 90 minutes I spend once a week with a group of men in prison who are different to me in every way — class, race, gender — is the best part of my week?”

“Drama has taught me ways to perform identities beyond what we are; what we experience. Not to start with their crime but to create and imagine a different world.”

She says it is these community-based projects which allow her to challenge her own practice and how it relates to national and international practice and theory, which then translates to what and how she teaches and mentors.

When she arrived at Rhodes in 2001, she gravitated towards building community work into her practice, accompanying students to apply their skills and knowledge in a real world context.

Now, what was once known as service learning forms a fundamental part of her pedagogy and research approach. She says, somewhere along the line it became known as community engagement, “and I was not really sure how to organise my CV — because for me, teaching and learning and research and CE are not neat categories under neat separate headings: they bleed into each other.”

Having found that community engagement is often mistakenly conflated with charity work, or the politically correct thing to do, she questioned the perception that it takes away from the core business, as if this is not political in and of itself.

“The necessity for Community Engagement week highlights the marginalisation, confusion and lack of understanding of what CE is. It creates a false separation, and therefore confusing discourse.”

It is also an opportunity for the university to highlight the different ways CE can manifest across disciplines and contexts, and celebrate the diversity of practices, as well as surface the tensions and debates surrounding the concept.

Research is measured by a community of peers, so why not have CE be part of the community of peers?”

Acknowledging that for some disciplines community engagement is an easier fit than others, on the other hand “for many other disciplines or fields, CE which integrates teaching and learning approaches and research requires far more creative thinking and application, and this needs acknowledgement and addressing. The playing field for teaching and learning and research is by no means even either.”

During the Q&A session, she was asked how to make CE less threatening for those who don’t know where to start. To this she suggested that staff and students visit the CE unit to find out about existing partnerships and “tease out how to apply your discipline to what people need.

Getting to each other physically is not hard. Reaching out across what we perceive as barriers, often framed in differences in language and background, requires courage.”

Grahamstown is one of the few places in South Africa where it's difficult to hide from poverty. We are confronted by it all the time, mainly because the township can be seen from many positions from the traditionally ‘white’ parts of Grahamstown.

For me the question is not so much how we should respond to the context of Grahamstown, and beyond; it is rather, how can we not?”
Thinyane talks mobile technology in development

Associate Professor Hannah Thinyane of the Rhodes University Computer Science department first came to South Africa because she was interested in seeing how technology can be used to help make a difference in people’s lives. She now dedicates her research to furthering development through the use of mobile technology.

“I think that in a country like South Africa, where there is such a divide between the rich and the poor, mobile phones offer an interesting platform to provide services for people across the whole population, and in particular providing services for under-served communities,” Prof Thinyane explained.

Having completed her PhD at the University of South Australia, Thinyane first joined Rhodes in 2005 as a postdoctoral researcher with the Telkom Centre for Excellence, based in the Computer Science department.

“I have always been interested in problem-solving and I see computer science as the application of this, using technology,” she said.

Thinyane has since worked on a number of research projects, including investigating the use of mobile devices for m-learning edutainment across a range of ages and subjects and examining accountability projects.

Recently, however, the large majority of Thinyane’s time has been taken up with MobiSAM, a joint initiative between Rhodes University and Makana Municipality to investigate how mobile technology can be used to improve social accountability monitoring.

“MobiSAM came about when a friend of mine, Debbie Coulson, and I sat down over a cup of tea and were lamenting the state of the water in Grahamstown.

“We started brainstorming about what we could do to contribute to solving the problem,” Thinyane said, explaining how her work in mobile technology for development came together with Coulson’s experience in social accountability monitoring to first develop the MobiSAM idea.

With funding from the Ford Foundation secured soon after that initial conversation, Thinyane and her team set to work developing the MobiSAM technology currently being piloted in partnership with Makana Municipality. The initiative will allow Grahamstown residents to make direct contact with their municipality via their cellphones so that they can, for example, report water outages or burst municipal pipes.

“This is a one-year pilot where we investigate how we can use mobile phones to increase citizen participation in local government,” Thinyane said.

It is hoped that MobiSAM will improve the dialogue between residents and their municipality. The technology also allows for records of outages to be kept. This can help the municipality to respond to problems and also give citizens the power to engage in evidence-based accountability projects.

“I think it’s our responsibility to participate in making the changes that we want to see happen,” Thinyane said.

The MobiSAM pilot project will be launched this month. With severe water outages recently plaguing Rhodes University campus, it will be interesting to see what effect the technology can have.

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Going the extra mile to be someone’s hero

Give5 is a fundraising campaign for students by fellow students. This year, in just over one week Rhodes students raised R47 859, taking the challenge, ‘How far will you go for a MATE’, to a new level.

Friday before the week-long campaign in April was the Fire Walk, where 36 students and staff found the courage to walk over red-hot coals.

That launched the collection week, during which students asked for donations of R5 or more from fellow students and staff.

Ovens were still aglow at midnight, with Give5-ers baking muffins and cakes for the next morning. The Give5 team set up tables around campus with collection tins, there were raffles and competitions, they collected water from the spring and sold it to students living up on the hill and found other innovative ways to raise funds.

Competition heated up as the week went on, with community engagement reps and senior students determined to see their reses and halls winning.

Of the residences, Botha House won, with post-graduate residence, Oakdene, second and College House third. Founders’ was the winning hall, Drostdy came second and Nelson Mandela third.

The money raised will go to the pocket money fund of the Dean of Students. This fund helps students who are on bursaries but do not have money at the end of the month to buy any extras.

Give5 helped students realised that not all their fellow students are in a position to buy a Coke, invite friends for tea or buy stationery when they need to.

Last year Give5 raised R44 000 in two week-long campaigns. This year set a record with R47 859 being raised in just over one week as more students decided to “be someone’s hero”.

Give5 is co-ordinated by the SRC and supported by Rhodes Alumni Development.
“Nine times out of 10 you will succeed”

Ms Desiree Wicks, who heads up the one-stop-shop Student Bureau, says her passion for helping others has continued to grow during her 27 years at Rhodes University.

“I really enjoy making a difference in many people’s lives. Because of the size, at Rhodes University you get to work on an individual basis with many students and parents and you can pay attention to individual applications, special needs, and develop relationships with students and parents,” Wicks said.

Being personally involved in the entire process of completing a degree at Rhodes University, including applications, admissions, registration and graduation, she has come to occupy a special place in students’ hearts.

Living out her philosophy of treating students and others who cross her path the way she wishes her children to be treated, Ms Wicks is the face of Rhodes University to thousands of students and their parents.

“There are some students who you work with from the beginning and you develop a friendship with them.

“You care about what happens to them and try and do your best to make it a pleasant stay at Rhodes University,” she said.

She recalled how touched she was to witness a student who required special needs attention during his years at Rhodes University wheel himself across the stage to receive his degree at graduation. With joy and pride, she shares the wedding invitation she recently received from a former student helper.

Retaining a 24-hour turnaround under normal circumstances, the Student Bureau is a one-stop-shop for new and returning students, their families and guardians. Assisting with the processes of recruitment, overseeing administration, residence allocations and assisting at graduation, Ms Wicks is intimately involved with the university experiences of many students.

She deals with students and their parents on a one-on-one basis, offering advice on what studies to pursue and often acting as a sounding board when things go wrong.

“Sometimes students don’t get the marks they had hoped for in their matric, so they can’t pursue their studies at Rhodes University.

“We need to try and help them consider their options and advise them on other options further afield if we can’t accommodate them at Rhodes.”

“They might have to go back to the drawing board and I help them rethink their plans,” she said.

As such, she needs to keep abreast of what’s on offer at Rhodes University and elsewhere. She has also had to keep up with the changing challenges students face to be able to accommodate them throughout their journey at Rhodes University.

“The pressures students have to face has changed over the years and many now struggle with family dynamics, divorces, parents dying, or having no parents. It’s tough to deal with these things,” she said.

She notes financial issues as a major source of stress for parents, who often become defensive when they can’t settle accounts.

“This is a difficult thing to manage and it’s hard for students. Money is quite a personal thing and it’s tough dealing with these kinds of issues because you wish you could help everybody,” she said. “Some families’ earning capacity excludes them from financial aid, but in reality they don’t have enough for their child to move into a residence,” she said.

She said one of the things she enjoys about Rhodes University is that there are avenues one can seek out to assist with such problems.

“She has become a wealth of knowledge on the different avenues available and has helped to establish the state of the art organisational structures which receive continuous positive feedback from students and their parents.

This is largely due to the ongoing assessment of in-house systems and regular upgrading of the administration processes.

In discussion with students in residence, or students who come into the Student Bureau, Ms Wicks said she often gets feedback that the students came to Rhodes because Rhodes responded first.

“It’s scary to know that people make life choices because we answered their queries first, and this is all the more reason for us to keep on top of our game.”

Investing in a dynamic and diverse team, Ms Wicks said, was crucial to this kind of work which relies heavily on the cooperation of group members.

“You have to train, develop and trust your team. You must remember how important it is to draw on your team’s strengths and also support them when they have difficulties,” she said.

Drawing on team strength is essential during the challenging months in the run-up to new academic years, where the staff work long hours organising intakes, admissions and registration, examination results, and disciplinary appeals.

“It makes a big difference if you’ve built up a good team and you can rely on them to come through for you during challenging times. I have received incredible support from my staff, some of whom have been with me for many years.

“In the tough times you draw on those relationships and they make such a difference.”

Ms Desiree Wicks
“Trading Live is about people building relationships, sharing your skills set, recognising that everybody has something to offer,” says Ms Diana Hornby, the Director of the Rhodes University Community Engagement office (RUCE). The second edition of Trading Live, held the week after Mandela Day, was a roaring success with 95 organisations across town and on campus taking part. Compared to the 42 events held last year, it has more than doubled in number, and in enthusiasm.

Housekeeping was particularly involved this year, running around six events involving over 60 staff members, including teaching gumboot dancing to a group of international students and clearing the garden at Makana’s Kop old age home.

The Human Resources Division presented workshops to promote employability, workshopping with attendees how to write a comprehensive CV and cover letter. The student society Inkwenkwezi partnered with Raglan Road Preschool, facilitating a painting workshop with the children. “Building a relationship with the school was definitely the most rewarding aspect of the experience for me,” said student Hannah McDonald.

Staff of the Centre for Higher Education, Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL) cooked a roast chicken meal, complete with cupcakes and ice cream for dessert, for Kuyasa Special School. Anthropology PhD student, Yoghita Kunbar showed the staff of Human Kinetics and Ergonomics (HKE) how to cook simple and nutritious Indian meals.

Ms Hornby said the event opens up a traditionally one-way flow.

“One of our goals at RUCE is to contribute to the organisational culture both on and off campus; promoting values of collegiality, care, citizenship and excellence,” said Ms Hornby. Held in partnership with the Human Resources division, Trading Live is an annual institutional event held the first Friday of third term.

“Sometimes we operate in little silos within the university and some students never cross into the township to engage with people who are different to them. Our aim is that all the students will leave Grahamstown with a fuller understanding of the South African context and the role that they can play in shaping a new society. We are looking for them to become critical and engaged citizens.”

“This dawned on me that the man we love and admire so much will not be with us much longer,” he said, calling to mind the significance of the role Mandela played towards nation-building and reconciliation.

“Your participation in Trading Live has brought about a special event to honour him.”

Ms Diana Hornby

On Thursday 8 August, a function was held in the Senior Common Room to thank all the participants as well as to showcase the photographs, sound bites and stories that the Journalism 3 students gathered on the day. This added a special dimension to the project, allowing everyone to be part of each event.

Ms Sarah Fischer of Human Resources thanked everyone for their involvement, saying it brought tears to her eyes to see the power of partnerships at work.

Deputy Vice Chancellor Dr Sizwe Mabizela shared his recent experience of visiting the hospital where Nelson Mandela is convalescing.

“Your participation in Trading Live has brought about a special event to honour him.”
A natural instinct for community engagement

Project leader of the Siyakhula Living Lab Management Unit, Ms Sibukele ‘Spooky’ Gumbo heads up a dynamic team of postgraduate researchers from the universities of Fort Hare and Rhodes.

Originally from Zimbabwe, Gumbo moved to South Africa in the early 2000s to study and began her association with Rhodes University while doing Honours at the University of Fort Hare. Through the collaboration of the Telkom Centre of Excellence at Rhodes University and Fort Hare University, some Fort Hare Computer Science Honours courses were hosted over video conferencing to grow the postgraduate work at the University of Fort Hare.

In 2006, while doing Masters research, she became a part-time administrative assistant at Fort Hare’s Centre of Excellence and had substantial interaction with researchers from Rhodes University on the development of the Dweza field site that had just been established in the Mbashe Municipality of the Eastern Cape.

Dweza is the main field site that is now more commonly known as the Siyakhula Living Lab (more recently, the efethu field site in Grahamstown and a new site in Keiskammahoek have been added to the initiative). Ms Gumbo assumed the position as Project Leader following the establishment of the Siyakhula Living Lab Management Unit in 2009. This was a central structure to support the field site operations and plan towards the sustainability of the Siyakhula Living Lab.

“Being project leader has been a natural process for me because I have a natural instinct for community engagement, logistics planning, marketing, project management and event coordination, on top of the technical know how to support the ICT Initiative,” Ms Gumbo said.

Her Nguni background is a bonus allowing for easy isiXhosa interactions with community members. The highlights of the role so far include organising a site visit for former South African minister of science and technology Derek Hanekom in 2008 and the high-level Siyakhula Living Lab marketing launch attended by deputy communications minister Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams in April this year.

In her capacity as project leader Ms Gumbo coordinated the setup of the Siyakhula Living Lab community executive committee, with 10 members from 17 communities to facilitate more effective communication within the community, strategise logistics and tackle issues on the ground.

Ms Gumbo said, “This enables us to function as a single unit. We have worked well with each other, with each community knowing that I am just a phone call away.

“We have arrived at the point where the softer network/IT infrastructure-related challenges are solved over the phone.” She publishes and makes presentations at local and international forums and exhibitions, where the living lab methodology has been adopted in many platforms, and is the contact person in the Living Lab in Southern Africa and European Network of Living Labs, of which Siyakhula Living Lab is a member.

Ms Gumbo is also responsible for coordinating week-long field trips, for researcher data collection and computer literacy training. These are carried out bimonthly at least.

“I always encourage the researchers to integrate themselves into the rural system and forge relations with the community members, through living within the community for week-long visits.

“I avail myself for as many of these trips as possible. It makes it easier to encourage the community to assist the students with the research and to participate in the proof of concept of the eService application development,” she said.

“I enjoy rural settings and the associated Eastern Cape culture. I have lots of time and patience to work with underprivileged communities and I believe in the Siyakhula Living Lab cause,” Ms Gumbo said.

Working in rural communities required a lot of adjustment as situations change from day to day, she said. The team faces numerous problems ranging from power failures to flooded rivers, “all because rural communities still remain at the end of the line in terms of service delivery.”

She believes the Siyakhula Living Lab still requires a lot more support from government, NGOs and industry entities who are interested in entering these types of rural communities and supporting innovative models of ICT for development.

Despite the challenges a temporary lack of support involves, she is motivated to continue her association with Siyakhula.

“I see the meaningful difference ICT is making in the rural communities we are working in. It is very fulfilling to do research based on real world issues.

“If only we had more resources and manpower to do more.”

Siyakhula – bridging the technology gap

Premised on the Living Lab methodology, which focuses on the principle of co-creation of solutions with empowered users, the Siyakhula Living Lab aims to find models for sustainable information communication technology (ICT) use in poor and marginalised rural or peri-urban areas, common in developing countries.

The project is the brainchild of Professor Alfredo Tersoli, head of the Telkom Centre of Excellence in Distributed Multimedia in the Computer Science Department at Rhodes University and also Research Director of the Telkom Centre of Excellence in ICT4Development, hosted at the University of Fort Hare. Partners for the project include private companies in the ICT industry and the South African government.

The programme has to date produced tangible benefits for the impoverished communities of the Mbashe district of the Eastern Cape in South Africa, close to the Wild Coast’s Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve, the main site of the Siyakhula Living Lab (SLL). According to Prof Tersoli, Siyakhula is an example of how marginalised rural communities that are very difficult to reach can be joined with the greater South African and African communities to the economic, social and
Fascinated by phones

Inspired by a lifelong fascination with mobile phones, Dr Mosiuoa Tsietsi is applying his software development and research skills to inform the inclusion of telecommunication services into the Teleweaver application server currently being built by Reedhouse Systems. The server is being built for deployment in the Siyakhula Living Lab.

“I think we are doing a good thing. It’s quite unique that a computer science department is involved in such work, but I believe we are enhancing technology and helping to bridge the technological divide,” Dr Tsietsi said.

Dr Tsietsi completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Kwazulu-Natal before joining Rhodes University as a Masters student in the Department of Computer Science in 2006. He obtained a PhD degree in Computer Science at Rhodes University in 2012 after developing a framework for the incorporation of user preferences and operator policies in a next-generation mobile network.

Dr Tsietsi’s research allows for a broad analysis of the impacts of the new technology on more traditional forms.

“This technology is allowing us to leapfrog the traditional development paths and to do the same research as people in America. There are no boundaries information-wise,” he said.

Dr Tsietsi is also a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Computer Science at Rhodes University and is the Technical Lead of the Convergence Research Group in the same department.

This group conducts research in the fast-changing world of telecommunications and the internet. He was recently appointed a lecturer under the Kresge accelerated development programme.

The programme, initiated as a result of the University’s strategic intent to enhance the diversity of staff, seeks to accelerate the academic careers of individuals from designated groups, thereby better equipping them to compete for permanent positions at Rhodes University.

This is done through providing opportunities to acquire, within a mentoring system, teaching experience, research skills and further disciplinary and/or teaching qualifications. These are three-year part-time contract posts, at the level of lecturer or junior lecture.

Appointment at the level of lecturer requires at least a Masters degree, and appointment at Junior Lecturer level requires at least an Honours degree.

“The work I accomplished during my PhD yielded a novel model for service orchestration in mobile telecommunication networks and also resulted in the construction of a prototype that was developed using open-source and free software,” Dr Tsietsi said.

“The main purpose of my postdoctoral appointments has been to implement this model more extensively than I was able to during my PhD, and to evaluate its suitability to deliver complex, converged services.”

As the only postdoctoral researcher in the Convergence Research Group, he has also been responsible for providing strategic direction for research projects and has assisted Professor Alfredo Terzoli, founder of the Siyakhula Living Lab, in the supervision of Honours and Masters students.

This has involved chairing weekly meetings in which technical problems were discussed and resolved, as well as spending a significant amount of time working hand in hand with individuals outside meetings.

rural communities

The original objective of the project was to develop and field-test the prototype of a simple, cost-effective telecommunication solution for marginalised and semi-marginalised communities where the majority of the South African population live. The project has evolved to include a generic service integration platform, Teleweaver, to support services for those communities. According to Prof Terzoli, the Teleweaver business model makes it a “game changer”, making ICT infrastructure sustainable in marginalised areas.

Transforming the experimentation in the Siyakhula Living Lab into robust industrial products has given origin to software house, Reed House Systems (RHS, www.reedhousesystems.com), which started its operations in 2010. RHS is currently hosted at Rhodes University, and offers internships to Rhodes and Fort Hare students.

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As a result of this project, service delivery platforms such as Mobi-Ser will have the capacity to offer the widest possible variety of future services. These will range from live translations into any language to video telephoning to registrations of births, deaths, marriages and divorces (in collaboration with Home Affairs). They will also include supporting cashless societies, where all financial transactions can be done via cellphone.

The awards recognise individuals and organisations that significantly contribute towards technology development and innovation in South Africa.

Prof Terzoli obtained a Laurea cum Laude in Physics from the University of Pavia, Italy.
Bringing home knowledge for the public good:

Distinguished international scholar Professor Lewis Gordon will take up the prestigious Nelson Mandela Visiting Professorship in the Department of Politics and International Relations.

The previous Nelson Mandela Visiting Professor was Amitav Acharya, professor of international relations and the Unesco Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance at the School of International Service, American University, Washington, D.C.

The Nelson Mandela Visiting Professors teach a post-graduate course in each year of their appointment and give seminars and public lectures.

Lewis Gordon will be Visiting Professor for 2014 and 2015. Rhodes interviewed him about the appointment and his plans.

Q: How do you feel about your appointment?

A: I am honoured, while humbled by the task of doing justice to its namesake — especially during such a crossroads in his life and the country we both love.

This opportunity comes at a fortuitous period. My wife Jane Anna Gordon and I have joined the faculty of the University of Connecticut at Storrs, where we plan to participate in some important initiatives in the Center for Human Rights. We have posts in Philosophy, Political Science, and African American Studies, with affiliations in Judaic Studies and Caribbean and Latin American Studies.

Additionally, Jane has been elected President of the Caribbean Philosophical Association. It is our hope to contribute to several worldwide initiatives on the discussion of the history of violence, poverty, enslavement, colonialism, and human rights.

Jane has already begun a dialogue with scholars in Senegal regarding linking up these projects with those in Europe, North America, South America, and the Caribbean. She plans, as well, to affirm her South African roots. She is the daughter of parents from Port Elizabeth and Cape Town and she plans to strengthen intellectual ties along these initiatives.

The Mandela Visiting Professorship will enable me to devote a substantial period to this stage of intellectual work in South Africa, which is, through sustained intellectual engagement for nearly two decades and also through marriage, where I consider my home in Africa.

An opportunity to bring such projects as Thinking Africa in dialogue with the many other projects in which I have been involved across the African continent and the rest of the globe (save Antarctica) is most felicitous. And in more precise intellectual terms, I have been thinking through questions of normative life beyond what have become prosaic conceptions of justice.

I will not only have much to offer students and colleagues in this regard in South Africa, but also so much to learn from them.

Q: What does the Nelson Mandela Visiting Professorship mean to you?

A: The Nelson Mandela Visiting Professorship, as I see it, is a national professorship. Its namesake embodies the spirit of the nation, its aspirations, its sense of character. That Mandela cannot — indeed, could not — be everything for the nation is a reminder of there being much to do, much to learn, much to figure out.

That is one of the principles of research and scholarship, and with the name of such a historic public figure behind it, it is also a reminder of the value of knowledge for the public good. These include inquiries into questions of justice, and the struggles emerging where justice is simply not enough in the global arena.

It is thus also a world professorship, since everyone understands the significance of Nelson Mandela. The namesake of this appointment exemplifies the important meeting of knowledge and courage in the form of action. It reminds us of the importance of public commitment and what it means to attempt to make human institutions humane.

Q: What are your main themes that you will be teaching and when are you starting teaching at Rhodes?

A: I have been meditating on problems of “unjust justice”, of what it means when systems of justice go wrong as we see in the rise of enslavement, poverty, racism, and other forms of human degradation in an age of many gains, supposedly in the spirit of advancing freedom.

I have been working on these ideas, with special attention to the intellectual offerings from what is known these days as the Global South, for my next book *No Longer Enslaved Yet Not Quite Free*. That project benefited much from my spirited engagements on African humanism and ubuntu at Rhodes last year.

I would like to explore these contradictions along the ongoing concerns of what it means to be human, what it means to be free, and what it means to offer critical reflection on such matters, especially in the realm of
Q&A with Nelson Mandela Visiting Professorship

political thought in terms of 21st century global challenges.

I hope to bring these considerations to national and international attention, not only through engagements with South African media but also international ones with which I am already involved such as Truthout.org and historiesofviolence.com. I will teach at Rhodes in September to mid-October 2014 and August to mid-September 2015, with visits in between.

Q: Why did you accept the Nelson Mandela Visiting Professorship?

A: I accepted the Mandela Visiting Professorship for several reasons. The first is my unique relationship with South Africa. Many among the downtrodden have honoured me through engaging my ideas from the beginning of my career when I wrote Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism straight through to such books as Existencia Africana and An Introduction to Africana Philosophy.

I thank P. Mabogo More for that, especially with regard to his wisdom of having me speak at the Worker’s College in Durban and his commentary over the years. The interest of his community of students, scholars, and activists (and subsequently others across the country) led to my visiting South Africa on many occasions, each of which was an experience of profound learning about what is proverbially greater than one’s self.

These bonds have deepened over the years, as thought in South Africa extends so much beyond the country. There is no book I have written in which South Africa is not considered in the global struggle for a better world.

This brings me to the second reason.

Mandela has been an inspiration for considerations felt to this day. For better or for ill, it would be a grave error to say the name President Obama without remembering who preceded him in the South African example. And at the end of the day, I think Mandela understands that his name transcends him. It is an idea. It could be taken in good or bad directions.

To be called upon to represent it is an enormous responsibility — indeed, it is what I have characterised in my writings as a responsibility for responsibility itself: It is a call to do something, to attempt to make good on an obligation that exceeds oneself.

This brings me to the third consideration. I have a high regard for the important work being conducted by such scholars as Siphokazi Magadla, Sally Matthews, Leonhard Praeg, Richard Pithouse and Pedro Tabensky, especially round the Thinking Africa project, as well as the scholarship and administrative leadership of Vice-Chancellor Saleem Badat and Dean Fred Hendricks.

I have enjoyed learning much from the intellectual encounters I have had with this excellent group of scholars and welcome the opportunity for a more sustained and intense engagement with them.

And finally, I think of those “invisible” South Africans.

Much of my work is about making visible that which is paradoxically invisible in plain sight. Whether as shack dwellers or “the poors,” or as those for whom the future seem to promise no voice, more substantial visits afford what Walter Rodney so astutely calls (paraphrased) grounding with my sisters and brothers.

Q: In your past interactions with Rhodes politics students, how do you compare them with your own students from your institution?

A: I have taught students at Yale University, Purdue University, Brown University, The Federal University in Brazil, Temple University, the University of the West Indies, University of Paris, Toulouse University, and now the University of Connecticut.

The students I have met at Rhodes over the years, especially those in the seminar on humanism I conducted last summer, stand among the very best of the various cohorts I have taught over the years.

I appreciate not only their intelligence and wit but also their humanity, their ethical spirit. As we know, South Africa is a country in which whom you meet entirely depends on who invites you. There are still whites-only spaces, although not officially so.

What I love about the students I met at Rhodes is how many of them have challenged and transcended those divisions without self-righteousness but instead through sheer commitment.

I should like to add that I also have a high regard for the students from other universities, such as Sabelo Mcinziba in Cape Town or those from Johannesburg, who at times hitchhiked across the country to attend my lectures.

Their hunger for knowledge is always nothing short of inspiring.

Q: Is there anything you want to add?

A: A friend, whom I consider to be one of South Africa’s underappreciated treasures, is P. Mabogo More. He is a courageous man who never failed to think about the power knowledge offers his students. I consider this appointment a part of his legacy, although he is not a faculty member at Rhodes and played no role in the selection process.

And then there are the many communities of activist scholars I have known over the years such as Drucilla Cornell, Rozena Maart, and Andile Mngxitama, who have taken unpopular stands on questions of gender, race, and sexuality.

I consider this, too, to be part of their legacy. And finally, there are my in-laws, Jean and John Comaroff, both of whom are South African. That makes my wife and children also of South African ancestry. I regard myself as a meeting of many worlds. This distinguished visiting professorship in South Africa is thus for me not only professional and political but also profoundly personal.
Each one share some: Saleem Badat

Dr Saleem Badat is the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University. He gives from his own pocket so that more young people can get a tertiary education.

In 1999, he was the first CEO of the Council on Higher Education, which advises the South African minister of education on higher education policy issues. His passion for education, particularly at tertiary level, was forged during a decade at the University of the Western Cape and he has built on that throughout his life.

With a plethora of degrees, as well as a certificate in higher education and science policy from Boston University, and honorary doctorates from the universities of the Free State and York, in England, he is also the recipient of a number of academic awards and fellowships, including the Hubert Humphrey Fellowship.

Also an author, his most recent work is The Forgotten People: Political Banishment Under Apartheid and he has worked hard to get the people featured in the book the support they deserve.

Q: As a committed educator, you have put your own money where your passion is — higher education — with the creation of the Jakes Gerwel Rhodes University Scholarship Fund. It is funded by a portion of your salary and sacrifice of benefits you are entitled to as vice-chancellor of Rhodes University. What inspired you to make this gesture?

A: Two things. One was the generous salary offered by Rhodes. While low compared with most other universities, it was more than adequate to sustain me and my family. I now had the wonderful opportunity to devote a portion of my salary and unnecessary benefits (like business-class air travel) to help open doors for others. In the same way, as a first-generation student from a modest family, local and international scholarships opened doors for me.

The other reason was my concern about the way vice-chancellor salaries were escalating and the growing gap in relation to salaries of academics and support staff. I feared this could be very corrosive of a sense of community at universities.

It was my hope that my gesture could also be leveraged to promote giving by others — which is exactly what happened. The late Dr Margaret Nash, a well-known anti-apartheid fighter, was the first to contribute — R20 000; a retired Rhodes administrator pledged R10 000. The fund now stands at more than R2 million. Recently, Old Mutual pledged up to 15 full scholarships in memory of the late Jakes Gerwel.

Q: What are the selection criteria for this scholarship?

A: The scholarship is for financially needy students from the rural Eastern Cape who have the potential to succeed at Rhodes University. Among these might be another Jakes Gerwel, who goes on to make an outstanding contribution to our society.

Q: Who was the first recipient of this scholarship and where is that student now?

A: The first award was made to an amazing local woman, Sikelela Julie Nkadi, for a BA degree. She is now in her second year. She came to our attention because of some columns she had penned in the Herald newspaper. We discovered that she had given up her job to become a secretary at Rhodes so that she could receive a fee rebate and study part time.

We offered her a Jakes Gerwel scholarship to study full time and she is thriving. As part of community engagement, she is actively involved in Upstart, a Grahamstown-based youth project for grades 8 to 10 learners from township schools. They produce a newspaper, promote poetry and writing, and are involved in radio and TV journalism. It is all part of developing literacy among high school students and trying to facilitate their entry into Rhodes.

“Higher education can change the lives of not only individuals, but also families and whole communities. I have seen this.”

Julie temps in the VC’s office whenever there is a need, so she keeps busy.

We want to keep track of people who receive Jakes Gerwel scholarships, to see how they progress in life and to celebrate their achievements.

Hopefully, they will be citizens who advance the public good and are philanthropic within the means available to them.

Q: You are also involved in efforts to improve schooling in disadvantaged schools in the Eastern Cape. How do you intervene?

A: Rhodes Community Engagement has numerous initiatives in Grahamstown preschools and schools. This is an uphill battle, as various factors make historically black schools dysfunctional. We are also working in Keiskammahoek and hope to extend this to select schools in other areas of rural Eastern Cape.

Our education faculty works with teachers in rural areas. It has a R21 million grant from Sishen Iron Ore Company Community Development Trust for work in Northern Cape schools, which is bearing fruit.

Q: In 1999 you were appointed as the first CEO of the Council on Higher Education, which advises the minister of higher education and training on policy issues. Did this job help you define how you’d make a difference?

A: Not really, it began much earlier. As a young student activist and later as editor of Grassroots community newspaper in Cape Town in the 1980s, I worked among students, youth, women and workers committed to building movements to destroy apartheid. In humble abodes and townships I learnt about human dignity and sharing, solidarity and community.

I then spent 10 years in the 1990s at the University of the Western Cape (UWc), which was a life-changing experience. UWc provided an environment for me to blossom as a young black academic and policy researcher. Here also were talented and determined students from working class and rural poor backgrounds whose only handicap was lack of funds.

The needs are so great and there is only so much an individual can do. My passion is higher education. It can cultivate talented, socially committed and critical graduates who have the knowledge and expertise to transform our society so that all can lead decent, rich and productive lives.

It can produce the knowledge that is essential for solving our problems. I am mindful of the fact that a bigger problem is all too often the lack of political courage and will.

Higher education can change the lives of not only individuals, but also families and whole communities. I have seen this.

So my giving is to financially needy university students. But it’s a tough call when your partner tells you about this incredibly talented and determined young woman who needs to be supported at school.

Q: You are the author of many books, including Black Man, You are on Your Own and most recently The Forgotten People: Political Banishment Under Apartheid. The research put into such works is almost an act of philanthropy in itself. Would you agree?

A: Interesting thought! Certainly, there is no financial reward for scholars for the years spent researching and writing books. You do it to advance knowledge, to recover hidden histories and to promote understanding and wisdom.

Black Man, You are on Your Own was commissioned by the Biko Foundation. All fees and royalties were donated to the Biko Foundation. Royalties from The...
Rhodes University academics Professor Rosemary Dorrington, Rhodes Visiting Professor Gregory Blatch and Dr Adrienne Edkins of the Department of Biochemistry, Microbiology and Biotechnology have been part of an international team of researchers to successfully decode the African coelacanth’s genome, comprising nearly 3 billion “letters” or bases of DNA.

The researchers collaborated with international researchers from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard University, among others, and co-authored an academic paper on the coelacanth genome.

Prof Dorrington led the South African project to collect coelacanth tissue samples for the genome project, while Prof Blatch and Dr Edkins were involved in the analysis of stress proteins in it. Prof Blatch’s PhD student, William Modisakeng (a patent attorney in Gauteng), and Val Hodgson, who provided technical support, were also involved.

The recent findings of the genome sequence confirms that genes in coelacanths are evolving more slowly than in other organisms such as fish and land vertebrates. It is a hypothesis many researchers have long suspected but until now, have been unable to test. Researchers suggest that this unusually slow rate of change may be because coelacanths have not needed to change — they still live in deep waters off the eastern African coast (a second coelacanth species lives off the coast of Indonesia) where environmental change has been minimal over millions of years.

Considered one of the most enigmatic creatures on earth, the sea-cave-dwelling, 1.5 m long fish with limb-like fins nicknamed “Old Fourlegs” was once thought to be extinct.

A living coelacanth was discovered off the Eastern Cape coast in 1938 by Margaret Courtney-Latimer and since then, questions about these ancient-looking fish, popularly known as “living fossils”, have persisted.

Following the discovery of coelacanths off Sodwana Bay by recreational divers in 2000, Prof Dorrington and Prof Blatch initiated the South African coelacanth genome initiative.

This later became the African Coelacanth Ecosystem Programme that is still running today.

It was an effort to revive research into the coelacanth’s habitat and characteristics. According to Prof Dorrington, the researchers were unaware of the magnitude of their undertaking — the coelacanth genome is the same length as the human genome, and the sequencing took 10 years to complete, involving more than 20 research institutes and hundreds of researchers. The initiative initially received support from the then Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST).

The successful decoding of the coelacanth genome sequence has had impacts on other areas of research including genetic links to the lungfish, another fish which possesses the rare “lobed” fins of the coelacanth. Reassembling the limbs of four-legged land animals, known as tetrapods, the lobed fins are suggestive that one of the ancestral lobed-finned fish species gave rise to the first four-legged amphibious creatures to transition out of the water onto land.

However, until now, researchers could not determine which of the coelacanth and lobe fish is the more likely species.

In additional research analysing RNA content from coelacanths, both the African and Indonesian species, and from the lungfish, the researchers were able to compare genes in use in the brain, kidneys, liver, spleen and gut of lungfish with gene sets from coelacanth and 20 other vertebrate species. Their results suggested that tetrapods are more closely related to lungfish than to the coelacanth.

But the coelacanth is still considered a critical organism to study in order to understand what is often called the water-to-land transition. Lungfish possess a genome which comprises 100 billion bases in length, making it almost impossible to analyse.

Rhodes researchers Dr Edkins and Dr OzlemTastan-Bishop, together with Prof Blatch, are currently involved in subsequent genome analyses that will be published shortly in a separate manuscript.

### Questions and Answers

**Q:** You were the recipient of an Inyathelo Exceptional Philanthropy Award in 2008. Do you think recognising philanthropists helps inspire others to follow suit?

**A:** I admire the work of Inyathelo in building a culture of giving and promoting know-how to mobilise funds for worthy causes.

I hope the annual Inyathelo Philanthropy Awards do inspire people to give. I doubt though that anyone Inyathelo so generously honours gives to obtain recognition.

**Q:** Do you think South Africans are good at giving?

**A:** I think so. If you think of giving not just in terms of money. We have many amazing people who give so much of themselves to take care of others, support family, neighbours and those in need, and build a more caring, gentler and just society.

Some who have amassed great wealth also actively give to various causes. But given the huge personal wealth and income inequalities in South Africa and the level of poverty, there could be less crass materialism and conspicuous consumption, and more giving on the part of the wealthy.

It will be good to see more philanthropic foundations of the American kind, such as the Mellon, Ford, Carnegie and Kresge foundations. We have some, but there could be more.

**This series is developed in partnership with the Southern Africa Trust**

**Source:** City Press
The next phase would be to conduct the biological studies to demonstrate that in the DNA sequences of the coelacanth genes to the equivalent ones in humans.

However, according to Dr Edkins, the sequencing and analysis of the genome of the coelacanth is only the start. The current analyses are predictions based on similarity of the DNA sequences of the coelacanth genes to the equivalent ones in humans. The next phase would be to conduct the biological studies to demonstrate that in the DNA sequences of the coelacanth genes to the equivalent ones in humans.

The ancient human connection

Dr Adrienne Edkins of the Biomedical Biotechnology Unit, Department of Biochemistry, Microbiology and Biotechnology, believes the research findings stemming from the South African Coelacanth Genome Initiative are significant for helping to deepen understandings of how organisms develop over time, but also to support conservation efforts to protect the coelacanth.

The fish lives in a restricted habitat and its numbers are declining.

In particular, climate change leading to an increased sea temperature could have consequences for the coelacanth that prefers to live in colder water.

“The sequencing of the genome will allow us to understand the biology of the coelacanth and link this to its requirement for a specific environment,” Dr Edkins said.

Dr Edkins conducted research alongside Rhodes University visiting professor Greg Blatch into analysis of a class of proteins involved in the stress response of humans and coelacanths, found in all organisms. Conducting comparative studies between stress situations in humans and coelacanths, Dr Edkins and Prof Blatch were able to uncover the DNA sequence which enables further investigation into the components of the stress response at the molecular level.

According to Dr Edkins, the coelacanth has many features in common with humans, despite the fact that this organism lives under very different conditions and has different stressors to those of humans. Curiously, the responses of humans and coelacanths are predicted to be very similar, suggesting that the stress responses of both species predate any environmental stressors, and were programmed into the species from the beginning.

“This fish hasn’t changed much over millions of years and yet it shares similar stress responses to humans, which have adapted significantly, meaning the responses are ancient,” Dr Edkins said.

However, according to Dr Edkins, the sequencing and analysis of the genome of the coelacanth is only the start. The current analyses are predictions based on similarity of the DNA sequences of the coelacanth genes to the equivalent ones in humans. The next phase would be to conduct the biological studies to demonstrate that in the DNA sequences of the coelacanth genes to the equivalent ones in humans.

The ancient human connection

As an expert in stress biology, Rhodes University visiting professor Greg Blatch obtained National Research Foundation and Rhodes University funding to establish a Rhodes University DNA Sequencing Facility in 2000. In considering which genome to sequence, a suggestion was made by Professor Rosemary Dorrington that the group focus on the coelacanth.

“Rosie (Dorrington) said there was only one genome that should be sequenced, that of the coelacanth, and it became so obvious that this was the ultimate genome project. So we established the South African Coelacanth Genome Initiative,” said Prof Blatch.

The group applied for funding from various national and international initiatives, and even wrote a letter to Sydney Brenner, South African biologist and 2002 Nobel Prize laureate in Physiology or Medicine, outlining their plans.

“We only obtained sufficient funding to establish a coelacanth genome resource to obtain the genomic DNA, RNA and establish a cell line,” said Prof Blatch.

Prof Dorrington was instrumental in establishing the facilities and protocols to extract the DNA and RNA from an accidental coelacanth catch. Crucially, the genomic DNA obtained from such a catch was ultimately the key to unlocking the coelacanth genome sequence, which was carried out with international collaborators led by Dr Chris Amemiya.

Prof Blatch, along with Dr Adrienne Edkins of the Department of Biochemistry, Microbiology and Biotechnology, is producing a companion paper on the stress genes of the coelacanth. This will be published in an international journal, as part of a series of companion papers following up with detailed studies on the coelacanth genome.

He said the biggest challenge was the time frame.

From having the idea to completing the genome sequence took more than 10 years.

His highlight, he said, was the privilege of being part of the international team involved in revealing the coelacanth genome sequence, and giving meaning to the genome data.

Dr Adrienne Edkins – Lecturer in Biotechnology, RU

fact these coelacanth proteins are functionally similar to those in humans.

“This will be a challenge as there are no laboratory models for the coelacanth and scientists do not want to disturb these endangered animals any more than absolutely necessary. We need to be creative and adapt our current models to allow us to test these hypotheses at Rhodes,” said Dr Edkins.

Being part of an international team working on an ambitious project on such an enigmatic species was a privilege, Dr Edkins said.

Dr Edkins has been at Rhodes University since 2009 as lecturer in Biochemistry and part of the Biomedical Biotechnology Research Unit and as a Postdoctoral research fellow, Chaperone Research Group 2008. Before that she was a Wellcome Trust PhD Fellow in Molecular Functions in Disease at the University of Glasgow, Scotland.
A lucky catch... with some very careful planning

Professor Rose Dorrington, Deputy Dean of Science and Professor of Microbiology at Rhodes University, played an integral role in establishing the South African coelacanth genome project in 2000 following the discovery of the African coelacanth (*Latimeria chalumnae*) off Sodwana Bay on the north-east coast of South Africa.

What was remarkable about the Sodwana Bay coelacanths was that they were found at depths of 70m-100m, and were accessible to scuba divers. By contrast the Comoran and Indonesian species occur in deeper waters from 400m-700m.

“The existence of a viable South African population once again captured the imagination of the scientific community and public at large,” Prof Dorrington said, explaining that it was this sighting that prompted her and colleague Professor Greg Blatch to propose the initiation of a flagship, multidisciplinary research programme focusing on the coelacanth and its habitat.

The proposal was enthusiastically received by the then South African National Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, which provided the funding to launch the African Coelacanth Ecosystem Programme in 2002. One of the broad objectives of the programme was to build a coelacanth genome resource. This would include blood and other tissue samples for providing DNA and RNA of sufficient quality for constructing libraries for genome sequencing. These are known as bacterial artificial chromosome (BAC) libraries, an essential element in doing large-scale genome research such as genome sequencing, physical maps, and gene cloning.

According to Prof Dorrington, the first problem is that *Latimeria* is considered to be critically endangered, which prohibits any capture of animals, even for research purposes.

There are other major problems such as their inaccessibility. With the exception of the Sodwana Bay population, coelacanths generally occur at depths below 100m, which means that they can only be reached by submersible or using a remote operating vehicle (ROV). “Animals that are brought to the surface do not survive the changes in temperature, pressure and reduced oxygen availability,” Prof Dorrington explained.

In view of the restrictions on the capture of endangered animals, the only opportunity for obtaining enough coelacanth tissue for a genome project was to take advantage of a chance catch, which was most likely to occur in the Comoros.

The Comoros are a group of volcanic islands in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Mozambique, northwest of Madagascar, home to the largest population of coelacanths. However, following its listing as an endangered species in 1989 and due to the efforts of the Comoran Association pour le Protection du Gombessa, the number of chance coelacanth catches had dropped dramatically, with the most recent catch only in 1997. Added to this was the lack of infrastructure or the capacity to collect and preserve tissues on the islands.

Access to unreliable electricity is confined to the capital, Moroni. Most of the villages along the coast where coelacanths had been captured in the past have little access to telephones or transport.

Still, it was agreed that the opportunity presented by a chance catch was too important and Prof Dorrington, representing the African Coelacanth Ecosystem Programme, travelled to Grande Comore to establish a local team led by Sahid Ahamada, including the coelacanth protection association and local fishermen, who would be able to respond effectively to a chance catch.

As luck would have it Comoran fishermen found a dead coelacanth with a swordtail fish in its mouth floating off Moheli Island on 15 September 2003.

They froze it immediately after it was brought to shore and shipped it across to Grand Comore Island, where tissues including blood, gills, liver and heart were harvested and frozen at -20°C.

A few days later, on the evening of 18 September, a coelacanth was caught off Hahaya Village on Grand Comore and towed to shore behind the fishing canoe.

“It was still alive, barely, the following day when Ahamada arrived to collect it. The fishermen had taken the trouble to keep the fish in the water, so Ahamada was able to take blood from the animal, shortly after it died on removal from the water,” Prof Dorrington said.

The tissues collected from both animals were shipped to Rhodes University. A preliminary analysis in Prof Dorrington’s laboratory showed that while the tissues collected from the Moheli coelacanth had not been preserved well enough, the genomic DNA isolated from the blood samples taken from the second (Hahaya village) animal was of sufficient quality for construction of a BAC library.
On stage he has viscerally brought to life everyone from a Parktown prawn, to life’s biggest losers and even the Devil himself.

For more than 30 years, he’s inspired as a teacher and performer. For the past decade, with drama company Ubom! He has helped bring the thrill of live theatre home to the Eastern Cape.

He’s even fulfilled the classic childhood dream of running away to join the circus — the world’s most famous one, Cirque du Soleil.

But Andrew Buckland is still bemused about being the recipient of one of two 2013 Standard Bank Standing Ovation awards for long-standing contribution to the arts. The Awards team is headed by renowned theatre critic Adrienne Sichel and the awards were announced on the last day of the National Arts Festival. Actress/director Nomhle Nkonyeni was the other recipient. Both had made “invaluable contributions to industry internationally, nationally and though reinvestment in the Eastern Cape”, the NAF website explains.

Typically self-deprecating, Buckland says, “I struggle to have a response, apart from being honoured and appreciating that people have made the gesture — but I can’t help thinking it’s because I’m old.”

“Or, as one fellow Ubom! cast member joked: ‘It’s because you’re old and still kiff!’”

Now, taking a hard-earned sabbatical after three years as Drama head of department, Professor Buckland plans to play “seriously play”.

His first port of call will be returning to the performance aesthetic of his earlier solo shows, such Feedback and The Ugly Noo Noo.

With wife and fellow director Janet, he is looking forward to creating a new work for the Baxter Theatre programme. Ms Janet Buckland plays an integral part in the creative process, with her astute and invaluable input, he points out.

“Other than putting my work into practice, which will hopefully result in significant research output during my sabbatical.”

Buckland starred in two productions at this year’s National Arts Festival: the ovation-award winning Crazy in Love and the comic Eastern Cape ‘western’ Hoss. Both were directed by Rob Murray, who was the resident director at Ubom! and has now taken the post of part-time lecturer at the department while completing his PhD.

Buckland and Murray share a love of clowning, mime and visual theatre and puppetry, all of which feature strongly in both pieces.

Sharing fruitful and satisfying collaborations with Ubom! East Cape Theatre Company since its inception in 2003, Buckland has written plays, directed and performed work, with a cast of young performers who continually bring new ideas to the table.

“With the age difference between us you quickly find the truth of what serves the story. Because people change so fast, you have to learn fast, too.”

Funding for Ubom! will last only to the end of the year, after which the company will be closing its doors. The Makana Drama Development Festival, in November, will go ahead as planned.

Buckland relates how Ubom! brought theatre to the people of the Eastern Cape.

“The structure of workshops, performances and theatre development gave audiences a fresh experience of theatre and a love of performance as a resource,” he said.

He laments its imminent closure as a huge loss.

He complements both Murray and Liezl de Kock, his fellow performer in Crazy in Love, describing how she developed a character for her Master’s performance who later became the
bittersweet Ginny in the play.

“Liesl’s clown is an impossibly optimistic and innocent, seeking and finding joy wherever she can.

“It was wonderful to see her then be able to plumb another area, as sometimes a character becomes a comfort zone, protecting yourself from uncomfortable or painful situations.

“This is definitely what I do, deflect a situation by making it funny, finding the comedy in the situation.”

As for the early influences on his work, Buckland names Polish percussionist Maciek Schejbal, whom he met in 1987 at the Market Theatre.

Schejbal wanted to become a jazz drummer so he would diligently get up every morning and practice two uninterrupted hours of bass drum. From him Buckland, newly trained as a mime, learned the necessity of daily practice.

“He taught me that to get anywhere near technical proficiency, you have to practice for eight hours a day, otherwise you don’t even contemplate it.

“He taught me to think about performance. When you face a mirror, or stand up in room full of people, what do you do with your body?”

Buckland also recalls how he put together a solo show for a late-night slot at the Market Theatre. This was how The Ugly Noo Noo, a physical comedy about a Parktown prawn, was born.

“This was a turning point for me, a way of seeing myself that was relevant to the act of performing.

“I had never felt that kind of reaction from an audience before, that rare kind of belly laughter.”

His style of one-man visual comedy and satire has paved the way for physical comedians such as Rob van Vuuren, who also trained at Rhodes.

“My career is a long list of bolts of good fortune. I’ve been incredibly lucky with the people I have worked with.”

That list includes acclaimed directors Lara Foot and Lionel Newton and former colleagues Gary Gordon, Reza de Wet and Jane Osborne.

Prof Buckland took up the post of lecturer at Rhodes in 1992, after which he was employed as Associate Professor. He has been instrumental in developing new undergraduate, Honours and Masters courses, particularly in the area of contemporary performance.

He has received numerous awards including two Naledi awards, a Fleur du Cap award for the best new indigenous script (1989) for The Ugly Noo Noo and the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Drama in 1989. In 2008, he performed the Sergeant Pepper character in the production The Beatles: Love with the prestigious Cirque du Soleil.
Rhodes University appears to enjoy a home-ground advantage when it comes to the Standard Bank Ovation Awards, with several every year for staff and students of Rhodes Drama Department.

Presented on the final Day of the National Arts festival, the Awards are decided by a panel after nominations from visiting critics and the media.

This year, Drama PhD student Rob Murray received a Silver ovation for Crazy in Love; Choreography Masters student Thalia Laric bagged a special Silver ovation for Skoonveld, which featured in the award-winning dance piece Plastic; and Directing Honours student Jess Harrison received a merit award in the Student Theatre Awards for promise in directorial conceptualisation and design in Moor.

Murray said he felt honoured to receive his second ovation as a director. The first was in 2010 for Pictures of You.

“I guess it’s even more special because of the strange limbo place that works like these fall into,” he said, describing his work as a combination of physical theatre and drama.

“It is a boost to us and other theatre makers who undergo alternative processes in devising work, that is, alternative to a more text-based or text-initiated piece.”

The show will be performed at the department later this year before being showcased at the Hilton Arts Festival in September. The cast is also working towards a Cape Town, KKNK, and possible Johannesburg season for 2014 — all leading up to September 2014 when the work will travel to the Amsterdam Fringe.

Murray hopes this will result in some fruitful exchanges with European universities “to get Rhodes Drama out there some more”. Also on the strength of the Ovation Award, the cast is eligible to apply for the Arena Programme at next year’s National Arts Festival.

Funded by the National Arts Council, the Arena is an additional Festival platform to bridge the gap between its Main and Fringe programmes.

Crazy in Love marks the fourth show in which Murray collaborates with the seasoned actor, writer and director, Andrew Buckland. The two share many resonances: a love for clowning, mime and visual theatre with a touch of dark, ironic humour, perfectly personified in Buckland’s character, Leon, a drunken hobo who goes on a journey in search of his estranged wife.

“It is always such fun working with him,” said Murray. “He is also a phenomenally generous performer, working in an almost ego-free way, just open to the process, his fellow performers, and with a total dedication to the creative needs and ambitions of the project.

“Watching him take full emotional flight is humbling and jaw-droppingly powerful.”

Liezl de Kock, shone alongside Buckland as Leon’s teenage daughter, Ginny.

“She is developing her own unique visual-clown-physical performance signature, and it’s an absolute pleasure to watch her growth in that.”

Murray will be working with De Kock to initiate and develop a Visual Theatre course at the department this year, which perfectly ties in with his PhD research, as well as De Kock’s MA research.

“We’re working with a great bunch of third-year students on masks, puppets, and object manipulation, all of which will culminate in public showings during the annual Theatre in Motion programme in October.

“This is pretty groundbreaking stuff in the country, and we are delighted to be spearheading it at Rhodes. Look out for this piece which is provisionally titled This Must be the Place — it’s going to be a visual feast!”

The dance piece Plastic won a Standard Bank Ovation Award, as well as a Special Silver Standard Bank Ovation Award presented to Thalia Laric and Steven van Wyk for the creation of Skoonveld. Laric teamed up with four choreographers, including Van Wyk, to form Underground Dance Theatre.

“As an emerging company these awards mean a great deal, in terms of recognition and visibility especially, but also as encouragement for our continued development as artists who seek to create progressive work of a very high standard,” Laric said.

After completing her Honours in choreography at UCT, Laric signed a contract to work for a year full-time with the First Physical Theatre Company.

“This year of training and performing was the best apprenticeship I could have possibly wished for,” she said. “I had the opportunity to learn from Juanita Finestone-Praeg, Alan Parker and Nicola Elliott. This was a most valuable experience as a performer and also good training in choreography and how to run a dance company.”

Currently based in Cape Town, she is currently...
promise at Rhodes Drama

In the SA Post Office-sponsored Student Theatre Awards, Jess Harrison received a merit award recognising promise in directorial conceptualisation and design for Moor.

“I feel most privileged receiving it, but it truly is thanks to my amazing cast who worked alongside me and made my vision possible. Their trust in me and dedication to this production is what won this award,” Harrison said.

Inspired by Othello, the multi-dimensional piece combines Shakespearian text with modern English and deep isiXhosa with the modern vernacular. Translated and written in collaboration with the cast, it uses heightened physical action to confront issues of identity, gender and race.

“I studied the original Shakespeare, along with writers such as Charles Marowitz and black consciousness writers Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, WEB du Bois and Franz Fanon, and amalgamated these with isiXhosa to collate a script.”

Developed as part of her two-year Masters in Directing course, she says the visual images, style, design and aesthetic of a production is fundamental to how she creates her work.

“I spend an immense amount of time studying costumes, fabrics, choosing colour palettes and devising the design. For me a play must be beautiful. Not in the traditional sense, but it must be a visual feast – striking and moving in its aesthetic.

“I like to make bold colour choices and work very intimately with compositional interplay of the performers’ bodies, the set and the props.”

She says the Masters course has been invaluable in allowing her the freedom to discover and nurture a directing signature, while also providing infinite space for learning and expert guidance from the supervisors.

“I don’t think I would be industry-ready without having done this MA at Rhodes. The Rhodes Drama Department influence has reflected in Moor through the strong physical theatre style and bold, unapologetic theatricality.

“I think these are key facets in the ethos of the coursework at this particular department.”

completing a Masters in Choreography at the Rhodes Drama Department.

“I am particularly interested in dance improvisation. As a choreographer, this is an integral part of my process. My time at Rhodes has allowed me the space to understand and articulate what it means to facilitate improvisational dancing. It is actually very stimulating to be studying and still be active on an artistic platform other than at a university. I find it really feeds me energetically and I am, after all, studying performance.”

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Rhodes University joins South Africans, the Constitutional Court and the Chief Justice of the Republic of South Africa Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng, in expressing deep sadness at the passing of the former Chief Justice of the Republic of South Africa, Dr Pius Langa.

Former Chief Justice Dr Langa served the nation with great distinction not only as Senior Counsel, President of Nadel, and Justice of the Constitutional Court but also in his capacity as Deputy Chief Justice and later as Chief Justice of the Republic. He was among the first Judges to be appointed to the Constitutional Court in 1994.

His enormous contribution to the development of South Africa's jurisprudence is known and appreciated worldwide. It was this contribution and involvement in the struggle for justice that saw him receive numerous awards including being honoured in 2008 with the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa, by Rhodes University.

In awarding him the LLD degree the University, through its Public Orator, Distinguished Professor Paul Maylam, noted the following:

“Pius Nkonzo Langa’s entry into the judicial world was first as a court messenger and then an interpreter in the Department of Justice. He saw magistrates failing to give the accused a fair hearing, and witnessed clear miscarriages of justice. Now came the realisation that he had to qualify as a lawyer so as to be equipped to fight for those who could not defend themselves. This realisation, together with his own early-life exposure to poverty, racism, and oppression, made him determined to achieve this goal — hence the years of study.

“From interpreter he rose to become a prosecutor and magistrate; then, in 1977, an advocate of the Natal Supreme Court. Now Pius Langa was in a position to act for the oppressed and voiceless. This inevitably meant a heavy involvement in political trials, his clients including civic bodies, trade unions, and individuals facing political charges.

“Pius Langa become a founder member of the National Association of Democratic Lawyers, serving as its president from 1988 to 1994; also a founder member of the Release Mandela Committee; and deeply involved in the structures of the United Democratic Front.

“With this legal and political experience he was, not surprisingly, in the early 1990s drawn into the negotiating process prior to South Africa’s first democratic election in 1994, serving as a member of the ANC’s constitutional committee and helping to draft the party’s proposals for a new constitution.

“This involvement made him an obvious appointee as a judge of the Constitutional Court in 1994. He recalled the Court’s first judgment, leading to the abolition of the death penalty, and the excitement this judgment brought to the members of the Court. Three years later he became Deputy President of the Court, and then Deputy Chief Justice in 2001 — the prelude to his elevation in 2005 to the position of Chief Justice.”

The Rhodes University community offers heartfelt condolences to the family and we wish them strength in these trying and difficult times.
Prof Gerwel remembered

THE CITY of Cape Town’s naming committee has approved a recommendation to honour the late Professor Jakes Gerwel, by renaming Vanguard Drive after him.

But a request from a man in Athlone, who wants the city to name College Street in Rylands Estate after his uncle, a “freedom fighter of the Pan Africanist Congress”, will get on to the renaming agenda only if there is evidence of substantial community support, the committee says.

Mayor Patricia de Lille made the announcement about Gerwel Drive at the 10th anniversary celebrations of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, saying: “He was involved in so many good uplifting things. The proposal — subject to public participation — to rename Vanguard Drive after Prof Gerwel will be a reminder of him every day to whoever passes the street.”

Prof Gerwel, former rector of the University of the Western Cape, served as director general in the office of Nelson Mandela, and was chairman of the Nelson Mandela Foundation.

Source: Cape Argus

Taking Africa seriously

To encourage critical debate and engagement on African politics, philosophy and violence, the Department of Political and International Studies hosted the third annual Thinking Africa colloquium from 7-9 August under the theme, ‘Violence in/and the Great Lakes: The Thought of VY Mudimbe and Beyond’.

This year’s colloquium was organised in collaboration with Grant Farred from Cornell University and used the work of internationally renowned philosopher, scholar and author Professor Valentin-Yves Mudimbe of Duke University in the United States to reflect upon the current situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Speakers included Prof Mudimbe, Grant Farred (Cornell University), Kasareka Kaywahirehi (University of Ottawa), Olga Hél-Bongo (Université Laval), Leonard Praeg (Rhodes University), Zubairu Wai (Lakehead University) and Ngwarsungu Chiwengo (Creighton University).

Co-organiser Grant Farred said the colloquium, designed to take up Prof Mudimbe’s invitation to consider violence in/and the Great Lakes, was intended to foster a conversation in which this issue could be discussed from a range of vantage points.

Vice-Chancellor Dr Saleem Badat welcomed speakers and guests at the launch of Prof Mudimbe’s latest book, On African Faultlines: Meditations on Alterity Politics, published as the second volume in the Thinking Africa book series.

He described the colloquium’s critical approach, shaped by disputation and engagement, as “refreshing, enticing and enchanting”.

Dr Badat said that in ‘Thinking Africa’, he is aware of how “less than seriously” universities in South Africa take the rest of Africa. “I don’t think any South African universities have come to grips with what it means to be a university in Africa. That’s the challenge in this society — we think we are exceptional and somehow different to the rest of Africa. We speak about Africa like we are somewhere else,” he said.

Rhodes, Dr Badat said, like many other Universities in South Africa, lacks the vocabulary, epistemological framework and language to ‘think Africa’. “We need to sort out issues of ontology before we can start sorting out the issues of Africa,” he said.

“Unless we start to grapple with this... we will constantly be having this problem at Rhodes University and in South Africa more broadly.”

Referring to the launch of Prof Mudimbe’s book Dr Badat said, “The launch of a new book by a scholar of Professor Mudimbe’s standing is an event to be celebrated. We are grateful for the opportunity to launch this piece of work at Rhodes University.”

Postgraduate students taking a course on African Theory participated in the colloquium. They are reading the work of various key African scholars, among them Mudimbe.

The Thinking Africa initiative is a project of the Department of Political and International Studies at Rhodes University. Thinking Africa runs annual colloquia on themes broadly relevant to the study of Africa. This is the third colloquium. Previous colloquia were entitled ‘Frantz Fanon: 50 Years Later’ (2011) and ‘Ubuntu: Curating the Archive’ (2012).
Dare to change the way we think

Kasereka Kavwahirehi, professor of francophone literature at the University of Ottawa made a heartfelt plea for empathy between victims and perpetrators of violence in the Great Lakes region in his presentation, ‘For a Common Ascension in Humanity’. He was speaking at the third annual Thinking Africa Colloquium last month.

Challenging the audience to consider the extent to which the international community has neglected to acknowledge or assist in stopping the violence, Prof Kavwahirehi asked, “Are Congolese men, women and children who were massacred, raped, and who are wandering around like devils from one makeshift camp to another in order to escape from an absurd death, really faceless (in the Levinasian sense) that their tragedy leaves the whole of humanity unmoved?”

“Don’t they have something in common or something to share with those whose security and well-being justify invasion, war and the exploitation of Congo’s resources?”

He suggested a lack of the fundamental notion of l’avec (to come into being with), which can give rise to disconnect among peoples. Drawing on the works of Jean-Luc Nancy, Prof Kavwahirehi explained how this sense of human existence as co-existence (of Jean-Luc Nancy, Prof Kavwahirehi explained how to disconnect among peoples. Drawing on the works of être-en-commun) constitutes and defines our being-in-common, which exposes us to a body dying of hunger, a tortured body, a bruised will, a war, mass grave, a migrant’s wandering, an insidious deprivation of being.

The loss of this shared togetherness, Prof Kavwahirehi explained, leads to a fundamental denial of humanity, and can give rise to violent behaviour.

According to Prof Kavwahirehi, it is at the fundamental level of the community of existence, “exceeding all politics and disconnected of all ideological reification, of all nationalism, patriotism, ethnicism, as of all forms of boundaries socially or religiously instituted”, that we need to think of the future of the Great Lakes region by replaying politics and, within these politics, the place given to ethnic groups. He also emphasised the requirement to “dare to change the way we think”, in no longer making reference to a nation state or ethnic group, but to la mesure sans mesure of the world, that is “to dare to think of what can withhold a world and put people together without sacrificing plurality; applying ourselves to uncover hidden bonds between people, ethnic groups, and continents, whose forces mutually oblige them”.

This fundamental task finally consists in re-imaging or re-founding, politically and socially, the African Great Lakes region to make it an area of humanisation and civilization, Prof Kavwahirehi said. To carry it out, it is imperative to acknowledge the vulnerability which goes beyond national and ethnic boundaries.

“In other words the requirement here is to look for a way to constitute the pain that persists into a starting point of a new comprehension, if we are able to transform our narcissistic absorption in melancholy into concern for the vulnerability of others,” he said.

Inventing the

In his presentation on ‘The Colonial Library: Conflicts and the Predicaments of Africanist Knowledge’ Professor Zubairu Wai of Lakehead University, Canada provided an overview of the predicament facing those seeking to produce knowledge about Africa in a way that does not repeat the problematic discourses of much Africanist social science.

Referring extensively to the works of VY Mudimbe, Prof Wai explained how the aim of Africanism has been to attain ‘truth’ about Africa and express it in ‘scientifically’ credible discourses. However, the production of these truths has been faced with two major problématiques: “problems concerning the very condition of knowledge” and “questions concerning the status of truth discourse itself”.

According to Prof Wai, it is from the age of exploration in the 15th century onward that the invention of Africa, “at least in the context of modernity”, is located.

“It was this moment that inaugurated thedefinition of the frontiers of the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’ under signs of ‘discovery’, violence, conquest and genocide, as well as ‘appropriation and expulsion’.”

Problematic representations of Africans form one of the most fundamental aspects of the dominant epistemological system, Prof Wai explained. Central to these portrayals is the figure of savage and cannibal.

According to Prof Wai, early descriptions of Africans by explorers, navigators and slave traders, as documented in diary entries and letters, form part of an archive referred to by Mudimbe as ‘the colonial library’.

These serve to “designate the body of texts and systems of representation that has collectively invented over the centuries, and continues to invent, Africa as a paradigm of difference”. In the presentation, Prof Wai explained how these images of savage and cannibal have so infiltrated knowledge and discourse about Africa that it may not be possible to think outside them today.

Prof Wai described the savages as being imagined as “nude, wild, violent, bestial, sensually indulgent and morally wanting creatures” and as living outside the pale of civilisation. The savage not only “merged with the monsters of the Middle Ages, who combined human features and animal traits, and even had attributes of devils” but came to be regarded as a “hideous creature with an unrestrained penchant for cannibalism”. His/her being came to be the subject of European speculation and obsession.
At the root of the madness

Since 1994 approximately 5.5 million people have died from war-related causes in the Eastern Congo, Rwanda and Burundi — and 38 000 people die each month in the Eastern Congo.

Mental health scholar Dr Laura K Kerr quoted these statistics in her talk, ‘A phenomenology of violence’.

Explaining how words like ‘incomprehensible, unimaginable, unspeakable, and evil’ are regularly used to describe such violence and are often witnessed in news reports from the region, Dr Kerr said they serve to temper efforts to intervene or feel moral responsibility to the victims.

“Along with such judgements are attitudes such as: The situation is complex. How do we help what we cannot comprehend? We shouldn’t tell these people how to handle their problems.

The inevitability of violence cannot excuse the long history of muted response from the international community to crimes against humanity and human rights abuses committed there.”

In her presentation, Dr Kerr argued that rather than related solely to the history of the Great Lakes Region, or to racism, or to colonialism, the failure to protect victims of violence reveals aspects of the deep psychology of modernity.

“Through half-hearted attempts to protect — if not downright ignoring the experience of victims — the people of the Great Lakes Region are learning firsthand how victimisation is often handled in shame-avoidant capitalist democracies,” she said.

Dr Kerr suggested that “…perhaps adjusting to managing violence is what becoming modern is centrally about — not because people are inherently violent, but because modernity is a form of civilisation that thrives through the propagation of defences against fully acknowledging and remediating the consequences of violence”.

She explained how the shame of violence is often dissociated from awareness, along with feelings of vulnerability and self-loathing that shame characteristically brings forth. Furthermore, the denial of shame not only keeps people from feeling the depths of their own suffering, but also from feeling the suffering of others.

For her phenomenology of violence Dr Kerr draws from her experiences as a trauma-focused psychotherapist and from lectures given by Professor VY Mudimbe in an advanced graduate seminar at Stanford University titled “Phenomenology of Madness”.

“It was the ideas Professor Mudimbe shared in these lectures, and the guidance he gave me in the development of my own research agenda, which initiated my belief that psychological ruptures and the denial of emotions like shame are central to the phenomenology of madness, as well as the phenomenology of violence,” she said, adding that Prof Mudimbe’s reflections on violence as implicit in the formation of Western thought have been foundational for her search for psychologies that attend to aspects of human experience beyond cognition and that may foster peoples’ humanity.

“As I grapple with how the West contributes to violence in the Great Lakes Region, I am also searching for ways to return humanity to the area. For me, as a student of Professor Mudimbe, valuing what makes us human and respecting all life has been a fortunate inheritance, and I feel compelled to pay it forward,” Dr Kerr said.

“Perhaps adjusting to managing violence is what becoming modern is centrally about”
Understanding the world through literature

In an effort to consider the interrelationship between formal structures of knowledge and literary writing and discourse, Rhodes University’s Department of English recently hosted the conference, ‘Interrogating the Human: Literary and Epistemological Interchange’. The conference was a joint effort between the English department and the Association of University English Teachers of South Africa (AUETSA).

Co-organiser Dr Spalding Lewis, Andrew Mellon Post-doctoral fellow in the English Department, said some of the guiding questions of the conference were how paradigms for the collection and transmission of knowledge about the natural world are informed, transmitted, and transmuted by literary means, and how literary criticism might play a role in the interrogation of epistemological genres associated with the categorisation of the human. The latter, she said, included but wasn’t limited to philosophy, jurisprudence, anthropology and biology.

The choice of title, Dr Lewis said, was intended to appeal to a broad audience.

“We had great attendance. We might have had fewer papers than if we had a broad topic, but the quality and range of presenters was worth it,” she said.

Keynote speakers included Robert Young, Professor of English at New York University and Laura Otis, Professor of English at Emory University.


“The whole experience was enormously successful and intellectually invigorating. There was a lot of cross communication between the different papers and because we had a strong theme, people could relate to the presentations in their own ways.

“A lot of people were very energised by it,” Dr Lewis said.

Among those who attended were postgraduate students from across the university, people from the broader Grahamstown community, and members of research groups from the university.

Other topics included travel writing, Empire, and the making of natural history and ethnography; Social Darwinism, race and gender; Early Modern/Enlightenment philosophical paradigms for human classification; Law in/as literature; science in/as literature; ethnography as genre; human science and popular culture; primatology and the human self; human and animal selves in classificatory epistemologies; animals and human selves in pre-modern epistemologies; patient testimonies vs. medical case histories in the creation of medical knowledge; the body and pathology; and the body as specimen.

Old Rhodian and PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh, Aretha Phiri, explored themes of patriarchy, nationalism and feminism in her presentation, ‘Specifying the female body in Yvonne Vera’s Butterfly Burning’ at the recently held English Department conference.

Interrogating what it means for women to be considered fully human under the historically patriarchal and misogynistic Zimbabwean liberation model, Phiri suggested that Vera’s focus on the black female body, “has the paradoxical and adverse effect of (re)embodying, that is, containing, woman within her subjective limitations”.

Through a critical study of the Zimbabwean author’s 1998 novel, she said this effective limitation was paradoxical given the implication that women are able to transcend the constraints of patriarchy and able to realise an ‘other’, liberated self.

Phiri cited a contribution by philosopher and political scientist Achille Mbembe to a discussion of postcolonial African nations, in which he argued that phallic domination has been all the more strategic in power relationships “because it has direct, close connections with the general economy of sexuality”.

“Certainly Zimbabwe’s liberation model has been decidedly masculinist and patriarchal in ideology and approach, and Zimbabwean women have typically occupied an ambivalent, even traumatic, position in the national consciousness resulting in an ironic (re)economising and (re)colonisation of women’s sexuality and bodies,” Phiri said.

Novelist Vera argues that Zimbabwean writers should have the courage to examine themselves and asserts that the position of women needs to be re-examined “with greater determination and [as] a forceful idea for change”.

Deploying words as “weapons” and venturing close to the bone, her writing becomes a place from which to uncover the “emotional havoc” of black female subjectivity. This, she argues, creates a free epistemological space for women.

American post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler argues in her preface to Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex (1993) that bodies,
An ignorant curiosity

Drawing on some of her Masters work analysing the interface between history and literature in three contemporary South African novels, Beth Wyrill’s ‘In dialogue with absence: collections in Russel Brownlee’s Garden of the Plagues’ explored the cultural, historical and psychological locations of the proponents of an emerging modernity.

“I am interested in the ways in which ‘official’ historical narratives often borrow techniques from the realm of literature, and vice versa,” Wyrill said.

The three novels she is working with deal with South Africa’s colonial settler history, and the project seeks to show how these novels enter into dialogue with the kinds of discourses that have emerged out of South Africa’s colonial history. These are the master-narratives that perpetuate hierarchies of culture and the linear, progressive conceptions of time which validate realist, empirical modes of experience.

All three novels employ a style of writing associated with magic realism. The study considers how, by mobilising realism (rationalism) and magic (animism) as coexisting rather than exclusionary forms of cognition, the novels explore the simultaneity of different world views in settler societies.

Brownlee’s contemporary novel, Garden of the Plagues represents a ‘lived experience’ of the past. The book was written during his Master’s course in creative writing, under the supervision of André Brink, and the connection to Brink’s concerns with fiction and history are clear.

“In a clear echo of Brink’s recent conceptual preoccupations, this novel is set in the distant past and encourages the reader to question their own historical location. The book was written during his Master’s course in creative writing, under the supervision of André Brink, and the connection to Brink’s concerns with fiction and history are clear.

“The novel, which looks back to South Africa’s early colonial history at the Cape of Good Hope, engages with historical artefacts and the absence of an understanding of their organising logic.

According to Wyrill, the project of collection in the novel, both in the compilation of a curiosity cabinet and in the creation of the Company Gardens at the Cape of Good Hope, is central to this notion. This is because the neatly categorised goods appear to the modern viewer weird and magical precisely because of this historical lack of insight. This inherent contradiction becomes applicable on a wider scale to the selective process of historiographical research, and intersects with literary goals in interesting ways.

“I find this interesting because we are all historically located within a societal, political, economic, geographical setting, that much is inescapable,” Wyrill said. “Even something as intangible or personal as the ways in which we think and speak is historically influenced.

“However, while the causes of historical events are painstakingly charted through our school history books, the same care is not given for the emergence of discursive practices and because of this, history is often constituted by what might be called an absent cause.

“It is from this point that my paper departs.”

—a world beyond themselves

Aretha Phiri

in writing, indicate “a world beyond themselves”.

Vera’s female bodies belong to women who themselves commit physical (self-) violence and Phiri says, “Vera’s utilisation of a simultaneously tactile and poetic writing invokes the ambivalence of asserting black female subjectivity and becomes an endeavour at risk of further objectifying the female body.”

Phiri suggests that Vera’s most critically read novel to date functions as a literary intersection of historical conceptions of the female body and the (feminine) self.

“Yes, in the novel’s paradoxical articulation of body as specimen — in its graphic portrayal of abortion and its physical effects on the body — I also reveal and suggest the limitations of Vera’s intimations of a liberated black female subject.”

“I hope this paper stimulates discussions about the efficacy of Vera’s specific form of writing and her (and language’s) ironic (re-)articulation of the female body as specimen,” Phiri said.

Phiri has spent the last six years in South Africa at Rhodes University, where she obtained undergraduate and Masters Degrees, both with distinction, in English. She made the Dean’s list on the faculty of Humanities at Rhodes University.

She was selected to participate in a postgraduate Exchange Programme at Ecole Normale Superieure (ENS) Paris, France, 2009. She has also been a recipient of the Andrew Mellon Scholarships and, more recently, the Scottish Overseas Research Awards Scheme (SORSAS) and the College of Humanities and Social Science Research Award.
Rhodes to Russia — All in a day’s work

Mr Mandla Gagayi, Head of Sports and Sports Administration at Rhodes University, jetted off to Kazan in Russia recently as the Deputy Chef de Mission of the University Sports South Africa (USSA) delegation. He accompanied six teams of student athletes to attend the World Student Games (WSG) from 6-17 July.

“I believe that some of the experiences and skills I learned there will help a great deal in my line of work. It had never crossed my mind that I would one day visit Russia. Being appointed as Deputy Chef de Mission was a confirmation of the kind of confidence that my peers have in my leadership abilities,” he said.

Mr Gagayi’s responsibilities included managing the Team South Africa office staff, chairing all team managers’ meetings, attending the Heads of Delegations meetings with the Chef de Mission, Ms Nomsa Mahlangu (the head of Sports at Durban University of Technology), as well as controlling the fleet of cars that were allocated to the team.

He says it was interesting to visit Russia and was surprised to find that it was quite hot during their summer. “One thing I envied about Russia is that they are never short of water, actually they have an oversupply,” he said. In juggling his busy schedule, he didn’t have much time for sight-seeing but he managed to visit the Kremlin in Kazan — which incorporates the Qol Sharif Mosque, the biggest mosque in Russia, as well as the president’s residence in the Moscow Kremlin.

“The atmosphere at the Athletes’ Village was very social and friendly but during competitions all the athletes were very competitive. The Russian people were friendly and always willing to help, though language was always a challenge. At times it took more than five Russians to understand that you are looking for a bathroom!,” he said.

As Deputy Chef de Mission one of the biggest challenges was realising that in South Africa the sports federations are not fully aligned with university sports. One of the main reasons is that there isn’t as much focus on university sport as on the national teams. For example, the Brazilian women’s football team is the same team that preps for the Olympics, and such teams often get a national coach to travel with them to the WSG. Another challenge is that some national federations hold tournaments, and sometimes the dates clash so the players that are chosen for these tournies lose out on competing at WSG, and vice versa.

He has also experienced some shortfalls in terms of the commercialisation of student sports, where a certain percentage of the team members are non-students. “At Rhodes we do not agree with this. As such they may find a 30-year-old competing against 19- or 20-year-olds, which is misleading and unethical. Commercialisation isn’t bad but we need strong principles in place to ensure that the playing field is even. The first move is to work on the rules of the competition, who will be selected and when, so that academic work doesn’t suffer.”

Mr Gagayi was appointed on 17 May due to his active role in sport administration, experience and general contribution to USSA. In the position of logistics manager, he attended a previous WSG with the USSA delegation to Bangkok, Thailand. Another feather in his cap was being selected as team liaison for the England national team at the Fifa World Cup in 2010.

A total of 175 members from various sporting disciplines competed. Returning victorious, the men’s hockey club received a gold medal, the women’s hockey bagged silver and a bronze medal was awarded to the netball team. One of the netball players, Nobu Phuza, was selected to join the universities’ national team. The other teams that competed were men and women’s basketball, dance sport, golf and squash.

A multi-coded sports event, the WSG (which is also known as Universiade) is ranked second to the Olympics in terms of attendance and world-wide coverage and viewership is ranked third after the Fifa World Cup, the most watched tournament on the planet.

For each country to participate, the teams have to be approved by the International Federation for University Sports (FISU) which looks at previous rankings of each code, accepting women’s hockey but not men’s, for example. “Once the teams are confirmed, we select the student teams, picking the strongest competitors, the ones we know are sure to win,” says Mr Gagayi.

Elected at the annual USSA conference in April, Mr Gagayi also serves on the disciplinary sub-committee, where he was tasked with selecting five credible individuals who have knowledge of both sports and law to serve on the committee alongside him.

After experiencing a division between members of the formerly white and formerly black universities, he believes that USSA is swiftly moving into a new direction; this he says, is clearly evident in the diverse spread of candidates, with a fair mix between students and staff. Also, for the first time a deputy vice-chancellor has been elected as president with Prof Tyrone Pretorius of Pretoria University occupying a position formerly occupied by students.

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