

A tribute and a celebration of Bhekizizwe Peterson

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*Mrena*¹ where do I find words to capture such an ordinary yet so deep a soul that you were? Where do I get the inspiration – the muse – during these hard times when death walks among us with stealth and like a wily thief in the dead of the night takes without a warning? Where do I find words to bear witness to this great loss and gap that you have left? Where do I find words when you always warned us to respect words because words are sacred? *Mrena*, when we last spoke we had agreed that we should break bread together before this deadly virus spikes again. Why did I not get a hint that this would be the last time I would speak to you, and that I would never hear your wise counsel again? Alas, why do we literary scholars deceive ourselves that we have the garb of reading in between the lines or have the lines become so blurred that they no longer give any clues and prophecies about tomorrow. One thing is for sure my brother, and that is that your spirit lives on among us. I see it in your friends and colleagues dumbstruck by grief too deep to fathom; I see it in the tear-drenched eyes of your students; I see it in their tributes and celebrations – written in song and dance so compelling; written in words weightier than death itself; written in the tears of blood and agony – grief too heavy to contain but swearing that they will keep your legacy alive; written with the elegance of spirit and those deep insights only you knew how best to surface in them.

My dear brother, 3 weeks before you left us, you had paid your last respect to me in ways that words will never capture. You were involved in the external review of our Centre: the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship at the University of Pretoria, which you had come to admire so much because, as you put it, you thought we were engaged in some of the most relevant and serious research that few Centres like ours that you knew of could ever achieve. On the night of your passing on, I received the review report and as I read it, I could not help but notice your imprints. And although I was aware that you had fallen foul of this evil virus when you sent me a terse message: “*Mrena* I have tested positive with Covid-19,” like many I kept hoping that you would pull through. I could not accept that it had to be you. I was not ready for it. When the word came to us that you had passed on, I was devastated.

Bheki, how can I forget how you opened your arms to embrace me and my family when I arrived at Wits in February 1991? How can I forget those visits to your home; those parties that brought the best out of you as you yelled out to the rhythm of music? *Mrena*, how can I forget your rich taste in music and your love for cooking and for good food? How can I forget the sweet smell of smoked *snoek* you introduced me to? How can I forget your company at Wits during those early years of a difficult transition to democracy? Then, all around me, I saw no human warmth but plastic smiles. You could see in my eyes the pain of frustration as I tried to absorb the reality of a cold and heartless history that many continued to carry and enact in their daily encounters. The cheerless and sanitised corridors of Wits that reminded us of one of the private hospitals where death lurked like this virus that now hits the best of us without a warning. Then, we found a bond; common experience; common friends as we talked about theatre for development and your affinity to those comrades we held so dearly in the struggle for freedom and avant-garde theatre: Ngugi wa Miriee, Kimani Gecau and Ngugi wa Thiong’o – then refugees in Zimbabwe running away from Moi’s tyranny. We shared our abiding affinity to Caribbean literature: C.L.R. James’ *The Black Jacobins*; George

Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*; Kamau Brathwaite's *Arrivants*; Roger Mais's *Brother Man*, and then we would move to African American classics: W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*; Richard Wright's *Native Son*; Douglas's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*; Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* and then back to the African soil. Out of these daily chats emerged our postgraduate course on Black Intellectual Traditions. Thank you for pushing us to give coherence to black thought – even those that we had grown to take for granted. With your intellectual embrace I realised that my journey down South was not in vain after all.

Bheki my brother, to say that you were a consummate scholar is an understatement. You were simply a rare breed of Professors who kept their lane and insisted as you always did in word and practice that a true vocation of a scholar was to offer intellectual leadership, not from a lofty pedestal, but by coming to the level of your students and those marginalised communities, especially the youth. To say too that you were an excellent mentor is another cliché for you did it so naturally, and with a rare sense of dedication and ordinariness that went unnoticed for undiscerning eyes – never looking for attention or reward. For you this call to nurture and allow others to dream and grow was a vocation too sacred to parade. Little wonder that you left us with a nurturing intellectual institution called NEST. Was this your mission on earth my brother? Was the mission accomplished? Why do I think you still had a lot more to offer? When your protégé, Khwezi Mkhize, sent me a message to say, “*Mwalimu* I know you are hurting, but do not worry we will pick up the baton from where Prof Peterson left – what Prof Peterson, you and Simon Gikandi gave us will stay with us forever,” I was reassured that your legacy lives on. Yes, it lives on in those many students whose intellectual life you touched, directly or indirectly, far too many to list here. After all, the true measure of a serious scholar is to be judged against the quality of scholars s/he nurtured, but with a rare rigour like yours, always insisting that only the best is good enough.

Mrena, I know of nobody else that combines public intellectual practice with academic rigour and a compassionate eye for the marginalised voices – and by public intellectuals, I do not mean those who engage in flippant comments in the media, even in areas they know little about. I mean that gift to climb down from your intellectual pedestal to share knowledge in ways that speak to the everyday struggles of ordinary people and to generate a pedagogy of action and purposeful insurrection for change. This it would seem was your life for decades: your training of artists and actors, and more recently your interventions in African cinema, and promotion of local stories and homegrown cinema will be remembered for years to come.

Bheki my brother, your *commitment* to Africa's foundational writers, a bond we shared so dearly, especially those foundational writers that have been banished within the academy here in South Africa and beyond will remain etched in memory for decades to come. Bheki, is it surprising that the last gift you bequeathed to us was your edited volume, *Foundational Writers: Peter Abrahams, Noni Jabavu, Sibusiso Nyembezi & Es'kia Mphahlele*? Was this your last message to us as you always cautioned that the things that we now thought were so profound in contemporary literature and culture had long been theorised by these pathfinders?

Mrena, will the chilling memory of our final farewell to you as we followed the hearse taking you to your final resting place ever leave me? What more of your family? Your dear wife Patricia; your children, Daam, Neo and Kanyi; your siblings, especially your little sister Sandra, and your intellectual children scattered across this country of Tata Madiba, and the rest of the African continent and beyond – true testimony to your intellectual reach – our hearts go out to them.

Tsamaya hantle. Lala ka Khotso – go well my dear brother and rest in eternal peace. Life will never be the same: it was Harry Garuba, then Tejumola Olaniyan and now you. The evil hand of death has struck again at the heart of our literary fraternity, and far too soon.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

James Ogude, a Professor and Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship at the University of Pretoria worked with Professor Bhekizizwe Peterson for 21 years in the Department of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, before moving to Pretoria in May 2013. They remained close until Bheki's death and collaborated on a number of projects. In memoriam

Notes

¹. “Mrena” – a Sesotho word that means King is the endearing name that I use to refer to Bheki. He too would insist on calling me “Mrena” and when he wanted to be mean, he would call me “Tau” – a Chief – for as long as I can remember. Bheki always allowed me to practise my rudimentary Sesotho in our engagements, as I insisted that I am “Mrena wa Makwere kwere” – something he found so amusing often reminding me, tongue-in-cheek, that I have outlived my stay in Southern Africa and must head back to East Africa.