SOUTH AFRICA CONNECTIONS

Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding the statue of Cecil Rhodes in Oxford, and the indignation the name evokes in young and old alike, it would have been churlish of me not to accept an honorary degree from a venerable institution such as Rhodes university. In any event, my ego would not allow such folly. Indeed, it is with humility that I accept this honour. Several eminent Jamaicans were Rhodes scholars. They include the poet, novelist and educator, Neville Dawes; cultural theorist and sociologist, Stuart Hall; Jamaica’s Poet Laureate, Professor Mervyn Morris; and Rex Nettleford, the late Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies.

I am proud of my Jamaican heritage; proud of the fact that Jamaica was the first country to refuse to have anything to do with apartheid South Africa; proud of the fact that one of Jamaica’s most revered public intellectuals was the South African born novelist, Peter Abrahams. From the time of Marcus Garvey in the early twentieth century, Jamaicans have been known for our African consciousness. “If Africa noh free/black man can’t free”. That is the opening line from a 1976 reggae recording by the Twinkle Brothers, titled, ‘Free Africa’. Reggae music is replete with such expressions of African consciousness. And it is the power and ubiquity of reggae music that has brought me here today. For although I am a published poet, reggae music is the vehicle that has afforded me a global audience for my verse.

My first visit to Rhodes was in 2009 and I have fond memories of the occasion. It was during my first and last mini tour of South Africa with the Dennis Bovell Dub Band, organized by Hazel Walton of Purple Haze productions. We had concerts in Cape Town, Durban, Grahamstown and Johannesburg. We were well received everywhere. However, with the exception of Cape Town which was a sold out show, the tour was a flop. In fact, it was a financial disaster for Hazel Wilton who, to my astonishment, fully honoured her contractual obligations. I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank her for her integrity. The evening after the concert in Grahamstown we were invited to a reception here at Rhodes. We were wined and dined in fine style. Given such wonderful hospitality, the least I could do was to sing for our supper and so I gave a short poetry recital after desserts. Hazel Wilton told me that it was someone called Maurice who linked us up with the university and I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his initiative.

My South Africa connections go back further than the 2007 concerts. When I became politically conscious in my late teens, I joined the Black Panther Movement. Three South African exiles who had nothing to do with the Panthers were involved in my personal struggle for justice against the racist police force in Brixton, South London where I grew up.

One Saturday afternoon in November 1972, I was walking through Brixton market when I saw three plain clothes policemen arresting a black youth, using excessive force. I asked the youth for his name and address and wrote it down on a piece of paper. The police took the youth to a ‘black maria’ police van parked on the busy market street on Railton Road where there were other uniformed police. I wrote down their numbers. I intended to pass the information to the relatives of the youth. This is what we were trained to do in the Black Panthers, because the police would often arrest black youths and lock them up in remand centres without informing their next of kin. The police saw me writing down the details. Four of them grabbed me and threw me into the police van along with the youth. There were already two young black women in the van. I managed to slip the piece of paper I had been writing on to a comrade. It proved to be a crucial piece of evidence during my subsequent trial. During the short drive to Brixton police station in the darkened van the police shone their torches on us and beat and kicked us while racially abusing us. The three young people were charged with ‘sus’ that is, loitering with intent. I was charged with two counts of assault and one count of actual bodily harm.

What we in the black communities of urban Britain called the ‘sus’ law was the Vagrancy Act, a piece of nineteenth century legislation used in Queen Victoria’s time to control the movement of the unemployed. Notwithstanding the fact that some black youth were engaged in minor criminal activities, this dormant piece of legislation was revived and used by racist police officers to criminalise many black youth of my generation. You would be charged with ‘attempting to steal from persons unknown’, and it would be your word against the police. And you can guess whose word the magistrate would accept as the truth.

Within minutes of my arrest, a crowd gathered outside Brixton police station demanding my release. As soon as I was locked up I asked to see a doctor. I made sure I saw my own doctor after I was bailed so that there would be documentary evidence of the police brutality. That was also part of my training as a Black Panther. The case was tried in June 1973. All four of us were acquitted of all charges, thanks to the presence of two black people on the jury. How do I know this? The black bus conductor on a bus I was travelling one day happened to be a member of the jury. He gave me an account of the proceedings.

During the trial, I was represented by a barrister from South Africa of Indian descent named Barney Desai. He was born in Durban in 1932, and was reclassified coloured in 1957. He was active in the ‘defiance campaign’, Vice President of the South African Coloured People’s Congress, elected to the Cape Town City Council but prevented from taking his seat by the government and went into exile soon after. During his exile in London where he became an eminent lawyer, he was associated with Pan Africanist Congress. Barney is the father of the film maker Rehad Desai.

I couldn’t have asked for a better barrister than Barney Desai. His cross examination of the police was clinical. He was able to demonstrate to the court that the police were liars; that they had fabricated the charges against me. He advised me after my acquittal to press charges against the police for assault and malicious prosecution. However, after the ordeal of the court proceedings and the fact that I was preparing for university, I declined. However, I made an official complaint to the police about my treatment. My complaint was investigated by the police who, needless to say, found no grounds for further action. Before the trial, I had complained to local Community Relations Council in Brixton, an institution set up by the Home Office to mediate the struggles of black people in urban Britain against racial oppression. Naturally the CRC couldn’t do anything but I got a sympathetic hearing from another South African exile named Lionel Morrison. At the time he was involved in the race relations industry but later became known for his journalism. He became the first black president of the National Union of Journalists of which I was a member when I worked in television. I don’t know if Barney Desai or Lionel Morrison had anything to do with it, but shortly after my trial, an article about my case with the headline, ‘Why Blacks In Brixton Are Blowing Their Tops’, appeared in the Sunday Observer newspaper. It was written by yet another South African, a novelist and academic named Lewis Nkosi. Not long after the article appeared, Bloom, Farr and Levers, the three police officers who had brutalised and fabricated the charges against me and the three youths, were transferred from Brixton police station.

So my connection with South Africa began with three distinguished South African exiles in London. Barney Desai, Lionel Morrison and Lewis Nkosi. That period of ordeal - November 1972 to June 1973 – was an important turning point in my life. It was then that, as an aspiring poet, I made a number of decisions about language, orality and music, choices which determined the formation of my poetics. Having heard blues and jazz poetry, I decided that I wanted to write reggae poetry. My verse would be a cultural weapon in the black liberation struggles. Thanks to Roshnie Moonsammay of Urban Voices and Arts Exchange, my first visit to South Africa was in 1994. I gave a sold out poetry recital to an enthusiastic audience in Newtown, Johannesburg. In 1995 I had a reggae concert in Alexandra township. Since than I have done a number of poetry recitals including one for Poetry Africa at the University of Kwa Zulu Natal, the Bat Centre in Durban and the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town in 2004 to celebrate ten years of democracy in South Africa. I also took part in a special event in 2015 in Johannesburg to celebrate the life of African-American poet, Jayne Cortez, organized by Arts Alive. My most treasured memory of my visits to South Africa was meeting Albertina and Walter Sisulu in Soweto in 1995. In 2013 I was given a Lifetime Achievement in Writing Award by English PEN. The president of English Pen at the time was the South African novelist, Gillian Slovo. I don’t know what I have done to deserve it, but South Africans have been very kind to me.

Linton Kwesi Johnson

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