

**IF YOU DO NOT WRITE YOUR HISTORY, HISTORY WILL WRITE YOU OFF:
RAISING THE AFRICAN VOICE FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION**
[Lauretta Ngcobo Prodigal Daughters Stories of South African Women in Exile
UKZN Press 2012]

Paper presented by

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Today, I stand as representative of past generations of men and women from the Americas and Caribbean who would have loved to be here in South Africa and in the continent of Africa.

You see I carry the blood of individuals taken away from this continent centuries ago, we all know the history. No matter the distance and passing of time their children and descendants heard stories of Africa. They were taught, ways of being taken from the traditions and practices of African sensibility and conduct. African culture was transmitted through moral proverbs, folk tales, song and dance, religious rites, all reminiscent of their African origins. Preserved through the orality and written words of a resilient people forced to carve out new syncretic cultures as they were forcibly settled in western regions of the globe far from Mother Africa.

I remember reading the late Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1987) where she recounts visiting Ghana and walking through the market. Without opening her mouth people greeted her and spoke to her in the local vernacular expecting her to reply in turn. They were visibly taken aback when American-English emitted from her mouth. Her carriage and presence did not betray the 400yr+ rupture and absence of her familial presence. As the saying goes "the apple does not fall far from the tree!"

I remember interviewing my grandmother a woman born and brought up on the little Island of Wakenaam at the mouth of the great Essequibo River in Guyana South America. On one occasion I remember she looked at a picture of herself in her later years and stated with a note of surprise in her voice: "I look very African!" I looked at her beautiful features, "Granny you ARE African!" "Isn't that remarkable? We were taken out of Africa but you can't take Africa out of us!" She looked at me, paused, and smiled. This was a momentous moment for someone of her generation where under British colonial indoctrination the population were taught Africa was not only geographically distant but also alien and its inhabitants were too.¹ Instead the mythology was perpetuated that these

¹ Anne Spry Rush, *Bonds of Empire: West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonisation* (Oxford, OUP, 2011)

colonial subjects had a different Motherland, not Africa but Great Britain-Britannia which ruled the waves with a plethora of culturally polyglot subjects around the world under its beneficent protection and accompanying privilege.

Of course this mythology would be blown out of the water when these colonial subjects responded to the call to rescue the Motherland in war time and the immediate aftermath of peace from the mid-1950s onwards. Both the political establishment with their punitive immigration laws² and the blatant domestic racism of members of the Host population would fully dispel any notion of warm welcome and acceptance.³

Emerging from the context of British colonialism where they considered themselves British with all the heralded privileges, it took an imaginative leap for British colonials like my Grandmother to see themselves as “African”. For those who came into contact with continental Africans once in Britain, and who followed the course of the fight for African independence from colonial rule, an sense of African self-hood and awakening begun to emerge. The generation that begun travelling to Africa from the 1960s was spurred by the hunger and recognition of sublimated African bonds.

Interviewing my grandmother about her rites of passage as she grew from youth into womanhood, hearing the lyricism of her words, poetry, storytelling, her proverbs, her humour, her spirituality, metaphors used particularly as she deviated from the received pronunciation of the Queen’s English and slipped into Guyanese patois and idioms I was left in no doubt I was talking to a distant child of the African continent with its sensibilities embedded into her very being no matter the distance and passage of time.

The longing for Africa, whether subconsciously, or explicit has seeped into the tapestry and output of the Caribbean mind, culture and religious expression. Prof Eddie Chambers evokes this sensibility well in his chapter ‘Africa: the call of a continent’ in his most recent book Roots and Culture: Cultural Politics in the Making of Black Britain (2016) of the Caribbean and by extension Black Britain’s intense focus on all things Africa from the 1960s-1980s. This was crystallized in supporting the liberation struggles of Southern Africa.

Of course our ties go back further, and one of Jamaica’s most famous sons, the great Marcus Garvey positioned Africa as central to his political ideology and the ultimate destination for people of African descent in the Western hemisphere. He

² Kathleen Paul, Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era (Cornell University Press, 2014)

³ See Mike Philips, London Crossings: a Biography of Black Britain, Andrea Levy’s fiction Small Island, Sam Selvon The Lonely Londoners, Moses Ascending, George Laming, The Emigrants, ER Braithwaite who only died last year at 104, To Sir with love Recently the Guyanese, South American author, teacher, physics Cambs grad, (both his parents Oxford Grads) ER Braithwaite (1912-2016) died at the grand age of 104yrs in Washington DC

was only one individual in a long line advocating for the return of Africans in the diaspora to the continent. West Indian seamen travelled and settled in Cape Town and elsewhere. They took Garveyite ideas into the African political landscape of black politics, joining the African millenarian movements in South Africa. West Indian teachers, missionaries, other professionals realised their African calling in South Africa.

The spread of Garveyite ideas was alarming enough for Government ministers to ensure the bureaucracy in cooperation with British officialdom blocked Garvey from visiting the country, and the rest of Africa. But as we all know you cannot kill ideas.

I was unaware of the West Indian connections with South Africa until I started researching early West Indian anti-apartheid solidarity with the people of South Africa. The fact that when a West Indian serviceman Milton King was murdered in the 1950s by white policemen in Cape Town, it was Caribbean officials and people that protested at the highest level at the UN calling for the boycott of the Apartheid government. It also did not take me long to learn of the life of Trinidadian Henry Sylvester Williams (1869-1911 not related), lawyer, writer, pan-Africanist and pioneer of the series of pan-African conferences from the late 19th century. It was Williams who championed the need for Africans of the diaspora to gather together to plan and address the imperial misdemeanours and to fight for African independence. His meeting with a south African woman touring Britain, a Mrs A.V. Kinloch who described conditions in SA for the Africans, resulted in his inspiration to form the African Association (later Pan-African Association). There followed the Pan African conference in 1900 in Westminster Town Hall with delegates from West and South Africa and the West Indies, the USA and Liberia. After completing his bar exams Williams moved to South Africa (1903-5). He was the first black man to be admitted to the bar in the Cape Colony in October 1903. He had all the credentials having studied at Dalhousie University and Kings College University of London and as a member of Gray's Inn London. Of course in fighting for the rights of Africans, it was not long before he came up against the formidable discrimination of the establishment in Cape Colony.

He was present at the launch of a coloured preparatory school staffed by West Indians. All this was too much for the status quo and he was boycotted by the Cape Law Society, he was seen as "preaching seditious doctrines to the natives against the white man." It became impossible for him to remain in South Africa so he returned to London.

This and other South African connections were brought home to me when I visited at a church in Bellville (Cape Town). The service was in Afrikaans however I was introduced during the service to the congregants and afterwards a lady approached me very excited because though I was introduced as British I had let it be known of my Caribbean & South American heritage on my Mother's

side. This woman wanted to know if I knew a particular family name from Jamaica. She told me her great-great grandfather was Jamaican before settling in Cape Town and marrying a local coloured lady. He had wanted to go back home but life intervened. She expressed a longing to explore the country and region and that she had heard family tales passed down. For her I was the embodiment of that tenuous link and she embraced me with such joy as if by touching me she had a direct physical link to her great-great Grandfather's family. One can never underestimate the pull of kinship no matter the separation of time and distance.

That's why I wrote the book, *The Politics of Race in Britain and South Africa: Black British Solidarity and the Anti-apartheid Struggle* (2015, paperback due May 2017), one fundamental element of my rationale was to demonstrate the history of Caribbean and Black British connection to continental Africans and their solidarity during the fight for political and social justice in the 20th century.

"If you do not write your history, history will write you off" this was a quote by Mama Ngcobo at the start of her account of the experiences of African women who were in exile during the liberation struggle.⁴

As the history of the international solidarity movement begun to be written, I knew there must have been networks of support and dialogue between black communities in the UK and South African liberation figures from all sides. The common denominator of experiential racism was too strong to ignore for those bearing the brunt whether in the British context or the South African context. Indeed as South Africa became "ungovernable" during the 1980s, so mainland Britain experienced violent racial configurations of its own in the urban cities of London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Bristol. The youth of hard pressed black communities literally fought back as the British police campaign of harassment through Operation Swamp in the early 80s, Stop-and-Search using the 'Sus' law, home invasions of black households provoked the youth to violently retaliate in 1981, 1984, 1985.

As we know a number of ANC and PAC operatives were exiled in London. His Excellency Oliver Tambo based his family in the London borough of Haringey. Talking to Black British activists from that time they drew clear inference to what was happening in South Africa and the way these influences including liberation struggles elsewhere on the continent fed their world perspective and understanding of their own struggle for human rights within their local and national context.

⁴ Laurretta Ngcobo, *Prodigal Daughters: Stories of South African Women in Exile* (UKZN Press, 2012)

This was the direct opposite to what I was told during a seminar at the University of Oxford. One participant opined that there was no history to write about Black British solidarity with the Southern African struggle and with South Africa.

Africa, its struggles and triumphs have never missed the radar of people of African descent in the diaspora. In Britain there is the annual celebration of African Liberation Day in May (25th) where the history, culture and contemporary concerns of the countries of the continent are focused upon.

African heroes are celebrated by Africans in the diaspora in Britain and elsewhere. They were and are memorialised by artists, musicians, intellectuals, spreading the word to the masses through musical genres such as calypso, and reggae, through poetry and more particularly as South Africa followed the painful course to full democracy.

For example;

- *'Biko's Kindred Lament'* by the band Steel Pulse (on the Album Tribute to the Martyrs)
- Eddie Grant's chart topping hit, *'Gimme Hope Jo'anna'* (banned in South Africa)
- Linton Kwesi Johnson's social justice poetry
- Benjamin Zephaniah's poems *'Biko: The Greatness'*

Going forward we must remember History is not only our past, it is our present. We *carry* history in us, and with us, we must acknowledge this as we move forward to grapple with contemporary challenges. If you want to judge a society, where it is, look at how it treats its children, its poor, strangers, minorities, and the vulnerable. I think we would all agree every society falls short but that is no excuse not to commit ourselves consistently and continue on the road of progressive change. We must be life-long students of the life biographies and endeavours of great men and women, learning from the lessons of the past.

The life of his Excellency OR Tambo is a wonderful illustration here:

He embodied characteristics we need in this complicated and complex national, continental and global interconnected world.

His character displayed: the spirit of peace-making and unity. He was selfless and disciplined, prepared to sacrifice his own comfort while committed to the cause. He had the security of self to encourage collective leadership, but was able to lead from the front too. Through his leadership skills OR Tambo was able to rebuild the ANC in exile after the Rivonia arrests and through his strength, humility, hard-work, wisdom and unflappable diplomatic ability to articulate the ANC's vision he was able to dispel the negative propaganda. He eventually gained the respect of critics and opponents.

As has been famously noted: he was the glue that held the ANC together in exile through the often treacherous environment of international politics.

Closer to home, OR Tambo was foremost in championing the rights for women in the movement. It has been stated that gender right in the Constitution is an acknowledgement of O.R. mindfulness of the rights of women. During his leadership of the ANC he had commissioned a Code of Conduct that enshrined the principle that women's rights were respected and should be upheld by the ANC in an effort to eradicate the abuse of women. Of course OR. Tambo could not have been the outstanding figure he was without a strong wife. Mama Adelaide Tambo the sustaining back-bone of the family and visiting operatives while they remained in exile in London, provided refuge and succour for visitors. As a professional in her own right she also maintained the household and family enabling her husband to play a leading role in driving the external mission of the ANC. As has been noted:

There is a danger that when we celebrate the lives of men, we do not properly acknowledge the central role of the women in their private and even public lives.

Tambo's success with international mobilization against apartheid is evidenced by the fact that by 1990, the ANC had 27 missions abroad. This was a staggering achievement and unusual for a liberation movements of the 20th century. Oliver Tambo succeeded because he understood that international solidarity was a critical weapon in the fight against the apartheid regime.

The fact that the United Nations declared apartheid a crime against humanity, is the result of his diplomacy. It goes almost without saying that the campaign to release Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, campaigning for sanctions against apartheid South Africa and the creation of an understanding of South Africa under apartheid, were skilfully executed under his leadership.

Furthermore he made a firm policy statement on the necessity for a multi-party democracy after liberation. Insisting there would be freedom of speech, of assembly, of association, language and religion. This was an alternative to the one-party state model adopted by many independent countries on the continent.

In December 1990, OR Tambo returned home. At the first Congress inside South Africa since then banning of the ANC, he reported on the mission, which he had been mandated, to undertake. He was able to deliver the ANC, united and successful.

The final words in tribute to OR Tambo....come from former President Mandela:

Oliver was pure gold, there was gold in his intellectual brilliance, gold in his warmth and humanity, gold in his tolerance and generosity, gold in his unfailing loyalty and self-sacrifice.

Also the current president His Excellency President Zuma states:

Current and future generations of South Africans will remain forever indebted to OR Tambo and his generation of freedom fighters, not only for the role they played in our struggle for national liberation, but also in shaping the South Africa of our dreams; a society we can all be proud of and a society rooted in freedom, equality and human dignity for all.

Africa going forward is an exciting continent to be in. Ask the investors rushing to avail themselves of its rich resources the length and breadth of the continent. Ultimately it is Africans who are masters of their fate. For the youth of the continent the challenges have never been greater, but we can learn a thing or two from those that have gone before who fought the good fight and left us with invaluable lessons to continue. That is why education is so important, as our great leaders constantly reminded us. We must educate ourselves by any means necessary of our past, to learn how it has shaped our present and inform our steps forward.

Every generation has a chance to create and start afresh with renewed vigour. Every generation must take responsibility and call others to account as we live our best lives while preserving the continent for successive generations to come.

One does not underplay the historic legacies of detriment to the continent and its peoples from many forces, but I would argue the narratives of survival, triumph, and resilience should give us hope. They far outweigh the doom-mongers. We have lost many on the way but we're still here aren't we? Living breathing, even those stripped away continue on, their descendants ever creative ever excellent in achievement that astonish the world. The time is NOW to make a difference and add to the canon of achievement laid on the arduous road to freedom by our forebears.
