

# The last professor has gone

## [ A F T E R W O R D ]

What will we do now that the professor has gone?

Prof Bhekizizwe Peterson cared beyond the gesture. He may be the last of that school of deep thought and care for ideas and for others. Generations of us whose lives he touched are reeling at the news of his death. We are devastated and left floundering. We fear that the project of scholarly care has lost its last soldier. Prof loved us quietly and he looked at the academy with the eyes of someone who'd seen too much.

Trained at the University of Cape Town, a postgraduate degree abroad, and then as a young academic at the University of the Witwatersrand which he never left, Prof BP experienced the cold wind of white liberalism. Even after he got his PhD, that institution's white liberalism could never see him as a peer. But he kept true to himself and in his quiet unassuming manner, got on with making the films, writing the scholarship, and nurturing the students that would be his true legacy. In the classroom, his intellectual prowess and care outperformed those who trade in the currency of power. He left palace politics to others and committed himself to a truly remarkable project of braiding a transdisciplinary scholarship on whose coattails we ride today. One moment he was writing screenplays, shooting films, writing books, and the next, he was supervising doctorates, teaching undergraduates, mentoring, sitting in communities across Gauteng — listening to the old and young narrating their lives, and creating spaces for community based creative outputs.

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Because his version of the university was not the ivory tower, he traversed these spaces without contradiction. Always with humility.

He chastised us with care because he was invested in how we impact the world. His retort when he disagreed with younger scholars was a rueful shake of his head— “I don’t understand you lot”. By the time he was 50, Prof BP was a legend. A self-confessed old school academic that took accumulated experience seriously. We miss his experience now more than ever. Suddenly, the world lurched, and it remains askance. Not everyone agreed with his style. Perhaps, he was modest to a fault. But he earned everyone’s respect. From his younger colleagues, I have learned that the title of Prof is a sign of reverence. We reserve it for him.

Prof was an oracle of sorts that we laughingly, but with deep affection, sometimes parodied. I remember Yolisa and a gang of his former students on social media, laughing about something he said in class many years ago. He had exacting standards when it came to deep knowledge and slow scholarship. He did not play at the surface. His students now teach across the world, and they are respected globally. He has spawned a slow scholarship that takes African life seriously. African literature owes much to his care for depth. Creative productions have lost a steadying presence.

I remember being part of a doctoral fellowship panel a few years ago. We interviewed an impressive young Nigerian applicant over Skype. We unanimously decided we wanted the applicant at the university. When we asked who his prospective doctoral supervisor would be, he gave one name: Prof Bhekizizwe Peterson. A year before Prof BP’s death, Adebayo Sakiru<sup>1</sup> completed his PhD. He organised several of us to do a roundtable discussion of *Zulu Love Letter*, a film by Prof BP and Ramadan Suleman. This was about 15 years since the film was first screened. We published the roundtable piece with a concluding commentary by Prof BP. The discussion can be found in the journal *SAFUNDI*.<sup>2</sup> Without really saying so, the roundtable publication was our tribute and gesture of care for Prof BP. Now, I wish we had been more upfront about our intent. A declaratory shout of our appreciation and admiration. We should have thrown him a rousing party even if it would have embarrassed him. We should have. But he leaves us a rich trove of his words. We cling to them.

In this epoch of busyness, he stood out for taking time and he was never in a hurry. Anyone who has ever spoken to him meaningfully will remember the length of conversations. In the past eight or so years, he partnered with Jill Bradbury from

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2 The issue can be accessed here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rsaf20/22/1?nav=toCList>

psychology to create NEST (narrative enquiry for social transformation) to advance the project of thinking across disciplinary boundaries. To watch their collaborative style across genres and disciplines and the deep humanity with which they engaged each other, and others, has been a teaching moment for us who see. Many of us affiliated to the project came to witness a scholarship of care. Grants for students, reading groups, field trips to Dobsonville. And he intervened when the bureaucracy threatened the academic project. While he was essentially laid back, he was impatient when students slacked and were avoidant. He would be exasperated and quietly intervene when the bureaucracy threatened to torpedo students' work and well-being. I sometimes thought he cared about the work of students more than they cared about it themselves. But this model of care helped them to learn to care too. This is why I claim that he was the last professor. We who remain are not as invested.

Prof Peterson has an impressive body of work but his investment in the collective project saw him edit important volumes on African intellectual traditions and do less of the work that builds a dazzling monument to his name. His co-edited book on Sol Plaatje is an example of how he supported younger scholars and cultural production. The last project he worked on is due out next year with Wits Press. This is a centenarian volume with about twenty essays in a work titled: *The Meaning of Foundational Writers: Abrahams, Jabavu, Nyembezi and Mphahlele Across a Century*<sup>3</sup>. Prof BP edits this book with a younger colleague and a writer poet<sup>4</sup>. Again, the intent is to surface lineages of scholarship to remind younger generations that much of the work we often claim does not exist, has been done. Our job is not to claim invention and discovery but to build on and tease out. To honour those who laboured before us. To doff our hats to our scholarly ancestors. Importantly, we see the hallmark collaborative style across all his work. Always building. As a way of nudging him to talk about solo work, I recently asked when he would be following up on his book *Monarchs, missionaries, and African intellectuals: redemption and revolution in South African theatre* published almost two decades ago. He told me that there was a longstanding project but that it was always being deferred and side-lined by more pressing work. By this he was referring to his collaborative projects and his students' work. This is his legacy to us.

What will we do now that the professor has gone?

Perhaps, we should recall his seminal teachings to us. To write while grieving means one is overcome by emotion. But I recall just two of the lessons I learned.

Prof BP taught us that music and film are not entertainment to be played as background at the end of a conference. As creative interventions, they demand full and respectful

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3 See Corinne Sandwith's review article, this volume of PINS.

4 Khwezi Mkhize and Makhosazana Xaba.

attention. To attend to creative works with our full selves means that we should bring our affective and analytical lenses to the arts. The people that he trained are fluent in the analysis of literary texts, artifacts, music, oral accounts, film, and other forms of popular cultural production. These genres are fundamental to African lives. Prof looked quizzically at the use of voice. For instance, at a symposium, he was confounded by the notion that we could see black dancers as denied agency when we'd watched them express it in a two-hour blaze on the dance floor<sup>5</sup>. Or that the dancers would not be able to speak for themselves if they felt silenced. To claim the silencing of creative artists is to imagine the speech act as the primary or only form of communication. He insisted that we attend to the creative arts beyond the idea of unidirectional speech acts from the conference lectern.

Prof BP taught us not to take ourselves too seriously. Take ideas seriously sure — but not yourself. He wore track pants, sandals, and on cold days — a warm hat on his head. But our heads turned to him like sunflowers find the sun. For many, he was the sun. For his family, generations of colleagues and students who have passed through his classes, the sun has gone.

Prof BP became my mentor about seven years ago. In all this time, I have felt seen more than ever before. As COVID-19 restrictions changed our way of life, he would phone and then as he navigated his way on Teams and Zoom, the conversations would last more than an hour at a time. A few months ago, he told me that his doctor had cautioned that, given his medical history, COVID-19 would be the death knell for him. And yet when he did get it, we were hopeful that he would recover. He had ten more years of teaching, deep scholarship and mentoring to do. We needed him still. The pace of the vaccine roll out means that our most senior scholars are at risk. Given the immeasurable value of senior scholars, this means that the academic project is at risk.

Yesterday morning, in the turmoil of the news of his death, I spoke with his long-time collaborator, and she told me that they spoke almost daily. Long conversations about work, but mostly about life. She is at sea and already misses his counsel and care. But we (Jill and myself) are not from his discipline. We come into his orbit later in life. There are colleagues who have worked with him for decades and I know that they are shattered. We are crushed and adrift now that the sun has gone. But as Prof BP enters the ancestral realm, I imagine that he is already a senior ancestor. One that we pour libations for and salute for all he did and what he means to us. We will have to figure out how to live now that the last professor has gone.

A great man has slipped away in a great plague. No bells to mark this moment. Marooned in Mozambique, I will watch this funeral on Zoom. We will weep into the screen. A portal

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5 *Under Southern Skies*, choreographed by Lliane Loots and performed by the Flat Foot Dance Company at the Wits Theatre, Johannesburg, 5 July 2019.

of grief. Pandemic restrictions mean that a tiny procession will follow a modest pine coffin. And then, as quietly as he lived, he will be gone.

No goodbyes then Prof.

### **2024 Postscript:**

This tribute was written in the immediate aftermath of Prof Bhekizwe Peterson's passing. Now, we know where he is buried. In the anonymity of the desolate cemetery, his friend Ramadan Suleman has ensured that his grave is covered in a bed of deep green succulents. Butterflies linger in communion with him. We imagine their unhurried conversation. His son ensures that a bottle of red wine seeps into the ground. Out of reach of university timetables, this is a place of peace. Prof is at peace.

The gatherings have happened. Commemorative conferences and lectures have been held. His long-standing colleagues, Isabel and James have found a new rhythm now that their old friend has gone. Mrs Govind has wept all our tears. Left bereft, his younger colleagues, Grace, Danai and Khwezi buckled, but their feet have found a footing. Slowly, they are rebuilding. Aunty Pat and her children do not forget the sound of his footfall through the house. Sometimes they strain at the sounds of dusk. Walking through campus, his spectre rustles among the autumn leaves. In the clearing of his aura, we meet and reminisce about him. We break out in laughter more than we cry when we recall a memory. We teach each other about him. He loved reggae, we are told. We hear stories about the wonder on his face as he walked the ancient grounds of Ethiopia. He connects us like a rambling narrative told by Gabriel García Márquez. A connecting tissue between disciplines. Between us. Long afterwards, we will remember him like we do stories. For him, stories were life. Now, he is our story.