

OBITUARY

THE POTHOLE IN MY HEART: TRIBUTE TO HARRY GARUBA (1958-2020)

Divine Fuh^a

*“My tears and the car held through the journey
Through the pothole in my heart and the tear on the road
Through the window, I watched the world rush past
The houses and the trees and the streets and the names
I had known and loved, all running backwards, with
No time to pause for a goodbye, no time to wave.”*

(From the poem ‘Leaving Home at 10’ by Harry Garuba, 2018)

To conjugate the life of any person in the past tense is a devastating tragedy. Obituaries are wicked. Through the subtlety of tribute, they viciously ascertain our disbelief, denial and incredulity to accept the reality of loss in the face of death. Because inside us there is still an inkling of hope, and a strong desire that it is all a dream. The bereft desperately want it to be a nightmare that we shall wake up from and so we can breathe a sigh of relief and spend the rest of the day reflecting on the implications of the dramatic episode.

Chinua Achebe writes in *Arrow of God* that “When suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool.” This has been a painful year, of illness, infections and loss. Trouble knocked and sat comfortably in our elder’s house. It is not surprising that for many, 2020 or this version of it must be uninstalled, if not retracted. The announcement of Harry Garuba’s journey beyond on 28 February this year is not a dream but a nightmare that we so desperately want to wake up from. He is not an occasional episode in the general drama of our painful existence. He continues to accompany us through our struggles. Harry was a junction, an intersection for many crossings, encounters and co-minglings. He was unassuming, a gentle soul whose taken-for-granted

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power was ever present in the conviviality of people that he had nurtured, comforted and added in his ever-expanding circle of inclusion. His ever-accessible tree of life provided almost everyone with shelter and a bumper harvest of support and genuine friendship. His smile and laughter became a contagion, and the aperitif with which he shared every encounter.

Harry's intellectual contributions are enormous. He published widely in the field of African and postcolonial literature, with one of his most significant and cited contributions focusing on what he termed "animist materialism" (2003), which he offered as a critique of "magical realism." His work is deeply grounded in his experience, humaneness and generosity.

Born in Akure, Nigeria, in 1958, Harry completed both his undergraduate and doctoral studies in English at the University of Ibadan where he taught until 1998 when he took up a position in the English Department at the University of Zululand in South Africa. That was the year in which Nigeria, after decades of successive military regimes, began a gradual transition to democratic governance. In 1998, General Sani Abacha, whose brutal dictatorship resulted in the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa, himself died from a heart attack, leading to the establishment of a Provisional Ruling Council that paved the way for a new dispensation by unbanning political activism. The same year, opposition leader Moshood Abiola died in suspicious circumstances on the day of his release from jail, while Olesgun Obasanjo was released from prison. That Harry Garuba moved to South Africa on the eve of Nigeria's new walk to freedom is significant.

Ola Rotimi posits in *The Gods are Not to Blame* that "the struggles of man begin at birth." Born two years before Nigeria's independence, Harry, like many other Nigerians and Africans of his generation, grew up and lived through decades of turmoil, civil unrest and the macabre violence of successive military juntas that defined everyday life in many post-independent states across the African continent. That these conditions produced such a fine thinker, like similar others, is testament to the tenacity of his intellectual astuteness that he fostered from a very young age when, according to his sister Blossom Garuba, he listened to BBC radio with his father, mimicked the pronunciation of newsreaders, and spent his time reading and writing poems and plays, even during playtime with his mates.

Harry joined his academic home, the University of Cape Town in 2001, where he was appointed to a joint position at the Centre for African Studies and in the English Department. At UCT, he dedicated his life to building the university as a decolonised, radically transformed and humane space, especially given South Africa's ruthless apartheid past and the controversial history of university politics and commitment towards African knowledge production. Joining African Studies at UCT within five years of the second Mafeje debacle and three to four years after the Mamdani affair, it is clear that Harry was bound to be entrusted with and to carry the Black Man's burden. In a country where Africans within its own boundaries had been coded for decades as both despicable and disposable, in fact nonhuman, Africa, especially the particular version located north of the Limpopo remained an abnormality. As Mahmood Mamdani (1998) wrote: "Students are being taught a curriculum which presumes that Africa begins at the Limpopo, and that this Africa has no intelligentsia worth reading." That Harry Garuba spent his career and tons of energy continually fighting for decolonisation and the survival of African Studies at UCT as a liberating and transformative epistemological and political intervention is not surprising. He carried the burden of Pan-African knowledge production with pride and humility, driving the initiative for radical curriculum change that he was already implementing in his courses and training of the next generation of scholars.

In the last years, Harry, besides his publications championed the cause of education for the poor. He was concerned that after decades of independence, education in Africa continued to be the victim of a resilient colonial and colonizing epistemology, packaged as scientific ideology and hegemony as his friend Francis Nyamnjoh writes in "Potted Plans in Green Houses" (2012). Grounded in his own experience of violence and destitution in Nigeria, Harry argued for "a direct link between the question of freedom and the question of education." In a TEDxStellenbosch Talk, he warned that "young people are getting increasingly uneasy about the kind of education that they are being provided with, about the kinds of institutions they are being schooled in and because of this, they have risen in protest, asking for statues to be removed (that's the easy part), asking for teaching practices to be changed (that's the difficult part), asking for the curriculum to be transformed, and sometimes using the word decolonized, asking that new kinds of relationships be forged between teachers and learners" (Garuba 2016).

In 2017 Harry was appointed Acting Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at UCT, a position few people wanted to be entrusted with. He offered two years of peace in the midst of mistrust and a great conflict about transformation and decolonisation as a collective project. He demonstrated remarkable leadership especially in his ability to listen, bringing stability, trust and much needed conviviality at the same place where a few years before his employment, another attempt to decolonise the curriculum provoked a scandalous debate resulting in the resignation of Mahmood Mamdani. Harry Garuba had to skillfully balance several opposing schools of thought about humanities, the academic project, African Studies, the purpose of the university and the nature and form of decolonisation and transformation.

The man with the cigarette often sat on a bench outside the parking lot of the African Studies building at UCT's upper campus, where almost everyone stopped by in a deep conversation as he smoked and drank strong coffee, accompanied by the kola nuts with which he chewed ideas. It was here that many encounters happened and relationships were forged. He claimed the freedom to go everywhere with his own script refusing to be defined and imposed upon by institutions. Harry remains a frontier African whose politics continues to subvert the continent's obsessions with borders, autochthony and ethno-national identity. Harry found love and family and home in South Africa, a part of his life he protected jealously and kept personal. He was a reliable and dedicated friend, and one of the very few elders to stand up for the cause of others and align himself in support of the marginalised and vulnerable. He demonstrated through his life, work and relationships that a good scholar is not the nerd trapped in the abstraction of academic debates and procedures, but one who recognises the value of relationships and solidarities. A person dedicated to caring for others.

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Tributes and Obituaries

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