

Preface: The Passion of Peter Abrahams

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When Peter Abrahams was found dead at Coyaba, his home in Rock Hall, Jamaica, in January 2017, a national day of outrage and mourning and apology ought to have been declared. But it wasn't. No surprise there, perhaps, cynicism and indifference having come to define our reasons of state. The autopsy strongly suggested murder. Indeed, there has been an arrest, though (as of this writing) no court trial has yet taken place.¹ But whatever transpires with the criminal investigation and the uncertain and slow-moving wheels of due process of the law, there will forever remain a moral debt that we Jamaicans owe to Abrahams. At the time of his terrible, unnecessary death, he was ninety-seven years old and one of the last Pan-Africanists of his great generation. He was, for a while, a close collaborator of George Padmore's (there was a later parting of the ways) and was centrally involved, as chairman of the publicity committee, in the organization of the famous fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester in October 1945.²

Abrahams was born in Vrededorp, a suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa, in March 1919, a "colored" in the enforced racial classification of the era. But from the late 1950s onward, Jamaica became his adopted home. Why? What was it about Jamaica that so moved him, so captivated him, so provoked him? In his 1957 book, *Jamaica: An Island Mosaic*, he suggested that he sensed something in ordinary Jamaican people, a fierce dignity of black endurance that made Jamaica an

1 See "Man Accused of Killing Peter Abrahams to Stand Trial in Home Circuit Court," *RJR News*, 21 February 2018, rjnnewsonline.com/local/man-accused-of-killing-peter-abrahams-to-stand-trial-in-home-circuit-court.

2 See Hopeton Dunn, "An Interview with Peter Abrahams: Custodian and Conscience of the Pan-African Movement," *Critical Arts* 25, no. 4 (2011): 500–513. See also Carol Polsgrove, *Ending British Rule in Africa: Writers in a Common Cause* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), xiii, 59–61, 70, 75–76, 81–83, 118–23, 131–38, 166–69.

“important symbol . . . in our race-ridden world.”³ He repeated this sentiment in 1963 when he said that “in the stumbling and fumbling reaching forward” of Jamaican people, one finds the “most hopeful image . . . of the resolution of the color problem in any of the so-called newly emerging underdeveloped world.”⁴ And he seemed not to have changed his mind throughout the more than half a century of active residence in Jamaica. For it’s much the same idea that catalyzes his last book, *The Coyaba Chronicles: Reflections on the Black Experience in the Twentieth Century*, in which Jamaica is imagined as the embodiment of burden but also of *possibility*.⁵ Jamaica, then, was a deeply special place for Abrahams. So, that this should have been his end, a victim of vulgar Jamaican violence, is, to my mind, a national shame, a national disgrace.⁶

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I never met Peter Abrahams. It is one of my many regrets. He was a household name, though, when I was growing up in Kingston. I can vividly remember his slow, rasping voice on Radio Jamaica every evening, giving his views on some matter or other of current affairs. I’ve no memory whatsoever of the content of those views—but that *voice* is unforgettable. It seemed to strain in a very physical way to speak, but that by itself lent it an earnest and strangely comforting authenticity. But, shockingly, in retrospect, I knew next to nothing about either his life or his work. How could that have happened? How could Abrahams’s global significance to the black world have simply escaped me? I’d of course read his 1946 novel, *Mine Boy*, when I was a student at the University of the West Indies, Mona, in the late 1970s. But like many others in that time of heightened consciousness of African liberation, I read it merely as an African “classic,” and specifically one that offered a profound meditation on the everyday lives of black mine workers in apartheid South Africa.⁷

I had no notion, however, of the place of *Mine Boy* in Abrahams’s overall oeuvre. In fact, I had no notion at all of Abrahams as a *writer*, his itinerary, the fundamental themes that preoccupied him, his seminal contribution to what we might now call a black transnational literature. *Mine Boy*, I would come to realize, was his third work of fiction. It came after the exploratory 1942 short story collection *Dark Testament* and the 1945 novel *Song of the City*. And it was followed by *The Path of Thunder*, published in 1948, a novel of impossible interracial love, written in ten days in a house in the mountains in the south of France. But Abrahams knew intuitively that *Mine Boy*, also drafted in that period, was special. It required, he said later, a “slower, much more measured” approach. It could not be “dashed off.”⁸ It would be *Mine Boy* that gave him a literary name. Then came, in quick succession, *Wild Conquest*, a historical novel of the Great Trek, in 1950 and the travel essay *Return to Goli* in 1953.⁹

3 Peter Abrahams, *Jamaica: An Island Mosaic* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1957), xiv.

4 Peter Abrahams, “The Real Jamaica,” *Holiday*, March 1963, 98.

5 See Peter Abrahams, *The Coyaba Chronicles: Reflections on the Black Experience in the Twentieth Century* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001).

6 See Oliver Stephenson, “No Outcry for the Tragedy at Coyaba,” *Peepal Tree Press: Guest Bloggers*, www.peepaltreepress.com/blog/guest-bloggers/essay-no-outcry-tragedy-coyaba.

7 Peter Abrahams, *Mine Boy* (London: Crisp, 1946). It was reissued by Heinemann in 1963 in the enormously important African Writers Series under the editorship of Chinua Achebe.

8 Abrahams, *Coyaba Chronicles*, 54.

9 Peter Abrahams, *Dark Testament* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1942), *Song of the City* (London: Crisp, 1945), *The Path of Thunder* (New York: Harper, 1948), *Wild Conquest* (London: Faber, 1950), and *Return to Goli* (London: Faber, 1953).

In 1954, Abrahams published his first memoir, *Tell Freedom*, a limpid and evocative account of his childhood in racialized poverty, his late and much interrupted formal education, his political coming of age through the Bantu Men's Social Centre, his first published poems, his flirtation with radical politics, and his final decision in 1939 to leave South Africa.¹⁰ By the time he published *Tell Freedom* (which had been gestating since the 1940s), the "freedom" with which he was especially concerned was *political* freedom—the challenges of decolonization and, even more so, of the making of nation-state sovereignty in Africa. This is especially evident in his brilliantly prescient and troubling novel *A Wreath for Udomo*, published in 1956.¹¹ It is, in a sense, Abrahams's Bandung novel, an unsentimental political allegory of the Pan-African project inspired, as he himself acknowledged, by the example of Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore.¹² Theirs was a relation that intrigued him—one a Western-educated African politician with a continental dream of African liberation, the other a Western-educated diasporic West Indian of African descent with little experience of Africa but with the intellectual capacity to formulate and drive the *idea* of it. The novel's eponymous protagonist, Michael Udomo, is a tragic hero. Anticolonial freedom has come, and he is now a modernizing prime minister of the symbolic Panafrica, put there by "tribal" leaders whose allegiances and traditions he doesn't quite share. But destroying the colonial order and building a postcolonial one are not the same activities. Udomo soon discovers that the Pan-African idealist (Thomas Lanwood) is not much practical use to him in confronting the emerging tragic choice (one that would become familiar to countless postcolonial leaders after him): either, for the sake of securing economic aid from his white enemies, he accedes to their wishes to betray and sacrifice his revolutionary friend, David Mhendi, engaged in liberating Pluralia, or he supports Mhendi and risks being politically destroyed by them. Out of expediency, Udomo chooses the former path. But alas, it does not save him from being in turn destroyed (in his case, ritually murdered) by the "tribal" leaders he has alienated in the process.

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It was Norman Manley's Jamaica that enchanted Peter Abrahams—the exemplary Jamaica of the late 1950s when everything redeeming seemed to lie in the coming future.¹³ This was the late-colonial Jamaica that enveloped him in *Jamaica: An Island Mosaic*. It was a Jamaica of seeming decency and reasonableness, guided by Chief Minister Manley's quiet, methodical purpose.

However, this Jamaica of the optimistic early "island mosaic" was not the dystopic Jamaica of Abrahams's 1966 novel, *This Island Now*, the only one of his novels not set in Africa.¹⁴ For by the middle of the Jamaican 1960s, political independence but a few years in the past, the People's National Party having lost both the referendum on Federation (1961) and the subsequent independence elections (1962), Manley's era had come to an end. There was already a creeping sense

10 Peter Abrahams, *Tell Freedom: Memories of Africa* (New York: Knopf, 1954).

11 Peter Abrahams, *A Wreath for Udomo* (London: Faber, 1956). The dust jacket of this edition bears an image of an Ashanti stool.

12 See Abrahams, *Coyaba Chronicles*, 125.

13 See Abrahams, "Norman Manley's Jamaica," chapter 9 of *Coyaba Chronicles*.

14 Peter Abrahams, *This Island Now* (London: Faber, 1966). His *A Night of Their Own* (London: Faber 1965), a novel of African/Indian solidarity in antiapartheid struggle, preceded it.

of danger, of the emergence of a new kind of politics and a new kind of political leader. In some respects, the form and theme of *This Island Now* are similar to those of *A Wreath for Udomo*—it is a cautionary tale about a progressive and popular black leader with a formidable will to power who, in the given realities of social and economic power, can see no way of creating the reforms he is confident will benefit his people without ruthlessly and with cynical justification destroying his political enemies and seeking to outmaneuver the economic elites whose support he nevertheless needs. Here, though, the mood (as the title suggests) is imperative. And unlike the sympathetic Michael Udomo, Albert Josiah, the protagonist of *This Island Now*, is not a tragic hero. He is a functionary, not an idealist, not much more than an ideologue who circumstances oblige to become a tyrant. Like Udomo, though, he is a man of intelligence and self-control, and isolation. He is a man who comes to be overtaken and driven by a one-sided sense of absolute purpose, willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of the realization of his ambition.

The contrast with Abrahams's last novel, *The View from Coyaba*, published in 1985, couldn't be greater.¹⁵ Here he sought a much-enlarged idea of the Pan-African novel, transnational and diasporic in sensibility and movement, with a panoptic perspective routed through his own Coyaba hills. The novel spans 150 years, from the last years of slavery in Jamaica to the turbulent third-world 1970s. It follows the itinerary of a descendant of maroons—Jacob Brown—who, significantly, becomes a student of W. E. B. Du Bois at Atlanta University and then, a mix of Alexander Crummell and Edward Wilmot Blyden, a missionary on the African continent. When he is forced to flee Uganda, he resettles in Jamaica, in the same hills from which his family came—but only to wait for the time when he is able to set off again for Africa. For Jamaica too is engulfed in a bloodletting in which poor black people are killing each other in a political tribal war without end. What sustains the long arc of the novel is its animating inner light, its spiritual quest for a place of sanctuary, an apotheosis of affirmative belonging, where the disfiguring effects of racism in all its ugly forms (including the varieties of self-hatred) are no longer the warping and corrupting forces that they had been.

We have, I believe, a great deal to learn from Peter Abrahams. He was a gift to us from the African continent, someone who saw something in us that we, perhaps, couldn't quite see ourselves. Alas, it might be that, in the end, we were *less* than he imagined. It is almost certain that he was *more* than we deserved. Walk good, Peter Abrahams.

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15 Peter Abrahams, *The View from Coyaba* (London: Faber, 1985).