

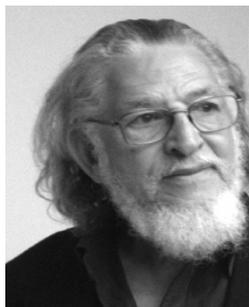
From Critical Troubador to the Politics of Emancipation

By Patrick Bond

The Dennis Brutus Memorial Lecture
at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy

South End Museum, Port Elizabeth, 23 February 2011

I am enormously honoured by the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy (CANRAD) to be delivering this lecture in honour of Dennis Brutus, in part because the Mandela Metropole was a home in so many material, spiritual and political ways for our beloved poet-activist. And it has been an occasional home to me, as well, for example in mid-1989, when I learned a great deal about South



Africa here. New Brighton comrades toured me around the township sites of struggle, and I met a then-banned NMMU political theorist, Janet Cherry, after an Idasa seminar at a local hotel. Together, they gave me some of the most inspiring lessons I've ever had, in political bravery and in the strategy and tactics of jujitsu against an oppressive state. But I was well prepared for this education, because like tens of thousands of other internationalists, my main tutor in anti-apartheid politics during the 1980s was Brutus.

A life in motion

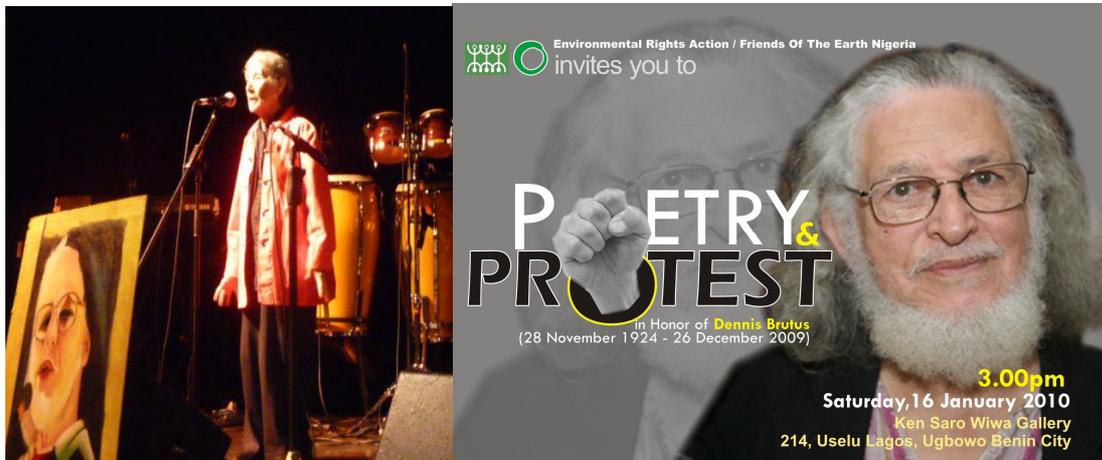
From his birth in then Salisbury Rhodesia in 1924, Brutus resided for extended periods in several South African locations (initially in Port Elizabeth – then Fort Hare for university, Cape Town and Robben Island at a different university, and Johannesburg on several occasions), then London, and during the 1970s-90s various US university campuses, and then home again, mainly in Durban from 2005-09. After eight months of prostate cancer treatment, and exceptional care from his daughter in law Jenny, on December 26, 2009, Brutus died at the home of his son Tony in Cape Town, in his sleep, aged 85.

It was at NMMU on April 17 2009 that Brutus received his penultimate honorary doctorate, the seventh of eight, and he was mighty pleased to have such attention from Vice Chancellor Derrick Swartz, the faculty and the graduating class. Just as pleasing was the ceremony on the previous day, at Paterson High School.



Everywhere he went, Brutus left extraordinary memories and wondrous tales. In my own attempts to record these from January-May last year, I was overwhelmed by several hundred messages of condolence and a dozen well-attended memorial services: first in Cape Town, and then Port Elizabeth, Johannesburg twice, Durban twice, and then Harare where the chimurenga hip-hop band Chavunduka threw a party, Benin City in Nigeria where a poet's collective and Friends of the Earth honoured him, at the Porto Alegre World Social Forum, and five times in the US as well: San Francisco, Washington, New York, Pittsburgh and Worcester Massachusetts (home of the largest Brutus archive). Remembering this brings first sadness, then joy that so many had only the kindest words for the Brutus memory – with perhaps two exceptions I shall mention later.





Brutus did not fade away, that's for sure. Even in his last days, just before the Copenhagen climate summit in December 2009, he was fully engaged, advocating social protest against those responsible for climate change, and promoting reparations to black South Africans from corporations that benefited from apartheid. He was a lead plaintiff in the Alien Tort Claims Act case against major firms that is making progress in the US court system.

Brutus was born in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1924, but his South African parents soon moved home to Port Elizabeth where he attended Paterson and Schauderville High Schools. He entered Fort Hare University on a full scholarship in 1940, graduating with a distinction in English and a second major in Psychology. Further studies in law at the University of the Witwatersrand were cut short by imprisonment for anti-apartheid activism.

After his banning in 1961 under the Suppression of Communism Act, he fled to Mozambique but was captured and deported to Johannesburg. There, in 1963, Brutus was shot in the back while attempting to escape police custody. Memorably, it was in front of Anglo American Corporation headquarters that he nearly died while awaiting an ambulance reserved for blacks.

While recovering, he was held in the Johannesburg Fort Prison cell which more than a half-century earlier housed Mahatma Gandhi. Brutus was transferred to Robben Island where he was jailed in the cell next to Nelson Mandela, and in 1964-65 wrote the collections *Sirens Knuckles Boots* and *Letters to Martha*, two of the richest poetic expressions of political incarceration.

Subsequently forced into exile, Brutus resumed simultaneous careers as a poet and anti-apartheid campaigner in London, and while working for the International Defense and Aid Fund, was instrumental in achieving the apartheid regime's expulsion from the 1968 Mexican Olympics and then in 1970 from the Olympic movement.



Upon moving to the US in 1971, Brutus served as a professor of literature and African studies at Northwestern (Chicago) and Pittsburgh, and defeated high-profile efforts by the Reagan Administration to deport him during the early 1980s. He wrote numerous poems and he helped organize major African writers organizations with his colleagues Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe.

Following the political transition in South Africa, Brutus resumed activities with grassroots social movements in his home country. In the late 1990s he also became a pivotal figure in the global justice movement and a featured speaker each year at the World Social Forum, as well as at protests against the World Trade Organisation, G8, Bretton Woods Institutions and the New Partnership for Africa's Development. Brutus continued to serve in the anti-racism, reparations and economic justice movements as a leading strategist until his death.

His final academic appointment was as Honorary Professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society (UKZN CCS) and for that university's press and Haymarket Press, he published the autobiographical *Poetry and Protest* in 2006.

Amongst numerous recent accolades were the US War Resisters League peace award in September 2009, the two Doctor of Literature degrees conferred in the Eastern Cape (at Rhodes and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Universities) in April 2009 - following six other honorary doctorates - and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the South African government Department of Arts and Culture in 2008. He also won the prestigious Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes awards.

Troubadour politics

How, in all of this, did Brutus maintain his 'stubborn hope'? What links these two central themes, *Poetry and Protest*, I asked the itinerant Brutus, and he replied, "The role of the troubadour." Traveling from court to court during the Middle Ages, the troubadour was Southern Europe's sage, a wit whose satirical songs offered some of the most creative expressions of love for life and people.

Too often, though, Brutus' poetry reflected such acute pain, suffering and above all anger at the court's ruling elites – surgically delivered, at times breathtaking, at times didactic, at times counterposing society and nature with dramatic insight, capable of breaking free from accepted form – that his internal punning and literary references were typically lost on followers who were first and foremost political junkies (like myself). Trying to keep up with the octogenarian after his 2005 move to Durban dazed even the most Brutus-addicted staff at CCS and the Centre for Creative Arts, for which he served as a fixture at the Time of the Writer and Poetry Africa festivals.

At least one overarching impression sings out from the cacophony of warm memories: the Brutus philosophy that genuine emancipation – not the half measures won in 1994, when class apartheid replaced racial domination – represents a war to be waged on many fronts because as one battle is won and many more usually lost, there are still others on the horizon that make an engaged life fulfilling, that keep the fires of social change desire burning long into the night.

No South African threw themselves more passionately into so many global and local battles. But from where did the indomitable energy emerge? In his youth, Brutus was radicalized in part by the denial of opportunities to play sports here in Port Elizabeth's segregated neighbourhoods, in which racial discrimination was inscribed on the playing fields. He was restricted to competitions in the black townships, hence his first campaign was for athletic fairness. This was an entrypoint into revolutionary politics, initially with the Teachers League and then the Congress movement.

By 1968, Brutus had lobbied sixty Third World countries to boycott the Olympics if the white South African team participated, and thus defeated the notorious International Olympic Committee leader, Avery Brundage, a man who was pro-Berlin in the 1936 Nazi games, pro-Salisbury after Ian Smith took over in 1965, and very pro-Pretoria at the Mexico Games.

In the process, Brutus received deep battlefield scars, suffering bannings (both personal in 1961 and affecting most of his poetry until 1994), a 1963 police kidnapping in Maputo followed by the near-fatal shooting outside Anglo American's central Johannesburg headquarters during an escape attempt, imprisonment and torture at the Hillbrow Fort Prison and on Robben Island from 1963-66, and alienating times in exile from 1966-1991.

It was partly his infinite mischievousness that prevented exile from wearing Brutus down. Former Bureau of State Security agent Gordon Winter called him "one of the twenty most dangerous South African political figures overseas."

He was extremely effective. At the 1971 Wimbledon tournament, Brutus disrupted a semifinal match played by Cliff Drysdale, winning acquittal for his deed from the House of Lords. Other pranks with a bite included the weed killer he and local students poured onto the rugby pitch to spell out "Oxford Rejects Apartheid" just as a key match began, forcing cancellation, following a march of 18,000 Londoners against racist sport, which compelled the Springboks to cancel their 1970 tour.



Such fun never quite washed away the bitter taste of apartheid. The residue lingered long after, especially when Ali Bacher won membership in Naas Botha's SA Sports Hall of Fame, because the cricket administrator "organised international rebel tours in the early 1980s," as the induction award stated. Brutus was also on the verge of induction at the same December 2007 ceremony, but upon mounting the stage, he handed back the statue, announcing,

I cannot be party to an event where unapologetic racists are also honoured, or to join a Hall of Fame alongside those who flourished under racist sport. Their inclusion is a deception because of their unfair advantage, as so many talented black athletes were excluded from sport opportunities. Moreover, this Hall ignores the fact that some sportspersons and administrators defended, supported and legitimised apartheid.

It was such deep principle that led Judge Irving Schwartz to declare in 1983, "There is no question that Professor Brutus has made himself hated by just about every [white] South African." Schwartz rebuffed Reagan Administration efforts to expel Brutus from the United States.

Those three decades in the US spent teaching at leading universities (Northwestern, Pittsburgh, Dartmouth, Swarthmore and others) gave Brutus opportunities for high-profile support to every doomed lefty political struggle: ending the unfair incarceration of Philadelphia poet Mumia Abu Jamal, American Indian Movement leader Leonard Peltier and Guantanamo Bay prisoners; halting sweatshops; imposing Boycott Divestment Sanctions on Israel; building Burmese solidarity; opposing Washington's militarism by following Thoreau's lead and refusing to pay a portion of his taxes; and attempting to prosecute George Bush for war crimes.

Without much if anything to show for these efforts, what did Brutus do, then, upon returning to South Africa? In 1998, he and Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane inaugurated Jubilee South Africa to, first, demand rejection of inherited apartheid debt, which Trevor Manuel's finance ministry was dutifully repaying, and then

launch a 'World Bank Bonds Boycott' aimed at defunding the Washington nerve centre of free market ideology.

Brutus and Trevor Ngwane initiated the latter campaign at the April 2000 protests against a Bank and International Monetary Fund meeting. At the world's largest private pension fund, TIAA-CREF, Brutus then persuaded trustees to divest Bank investments, just as he had twenty years earlier during the anti-apartheid struggle.

War on 'global apartheid' was now Brutus' apparently Quixotic campaign. Yet exactly three months before the infamous Battle of Seattle at the World Trade Organisation summit in November 1999, he addressed a major rally with a scarily accurate premonition: "We are going to set in motion a movement and a demand and a protest around the world which is going to say no to the WTO and it is going to start right here in Seattle!"

The WTO never recovered, and as recently as April 2009, the IMF also looked down and out – losing major borrowers, operating in the red and retrenching a tenth of its economists – until Manuel spearheaded a \$750 billion bailout by the G20 group of large economies, infuriating Brutus.

Other SA-based campaigning included leading demonstrations against the World Conference Against Racism in 2001 and World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002; anti-privatisation (he was at the founding meeting of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee in 2000); climate; apartheid reparations (which Pretoria finally has conceded make sense); a reversal of the 2007-10 US travel ban on University of Johannesburg Deputy Vice-Chancellor (and CCS founder) Adam Habib; fighting World Cup forced removals; Zimbabwe and Tamil solidarity; and in Durban, support for Warwick Junction small traders who were facing eviction, and a variety of other local eco-social justice struggles.

For this Brutus was labeled 'ultra-left', or as Mbeki aide Essop Pahad put it in a 2002 statement to *The Sowetan*, "Dennis the Menace!... We cannot not allow our modest achievements to be wrecked through anarchy. Opponents of democracy seek such destruction."

In the same spirit, Sam Ramsamy's takeover of the SA NonRacial Olympic Committee in 1990 exemplified the strategies of conciliation versus principled struggle. A week after Brutus died, Ramsamy observed that one of the world's greatest sports justice campaigners

did not fully comprehend the realities of reconciliation. Sadly, he divorced himself from post-apartheid reconstruction of SA sport. I believe that was because he did not fully comprehend the realities of reconciliation and the difficult process of uniting all sectors of SA society.

The reason was simple, as leading radical scholar-activist Ashwin Desai replied:

It is indeed true that Dennis did not understand the complexities of reconciliation and nation-building. This is not because he was for one moment of his life trapped in any obsessive racial mindset. He was the most open and approachable person on a one-to-one basis. Dennis ignored the national agenda because his political goals did not including the realities of a certain form of reconciliation. During the 1990s-2000s, as he became involved in social movement politics, he freed himself from those complexities, just as he had earlier freed himself from complexities imposed during apartheid upon 'responsible' blacks, to bolster the PW Botha regime's fake reforms.

I will be the world's troubadour
if not my country's
Knight-erranting
jousting up and down
with justice for my theme
weapons as I find them
and a world-wide scatter of foes

Being what I am
a compound of speech and thoughts and song
and girded by indignation
and accoutred with some undeniable scars
surely I may be
this cavalier?

1978

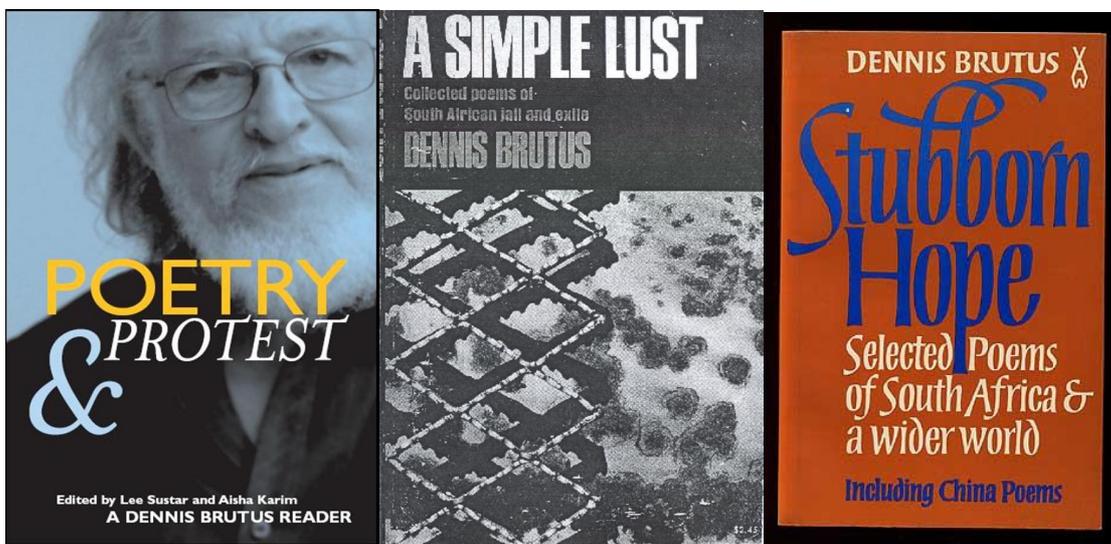


Literary accomplishments

Much can and has been said about the loving and nurturing characteristics of Brutus as a literary figure. Those who knew him understood how much he encouraged

future generations of poets. His written word was often breathtaking, and few have written so movingly of injustice combined with incarceration (*Letters to Martha and Sirens, Knuckles and Boots* during the mid-1960s), exile (e.g. *Poems from Algiers* and *China Poems* during the 1970s), and social struggle (*Stubborn Hope* and *Salutes and Censures*).

Anger against injustice generated intense and insightful poetry, because Brutus had the self-discipline to construct lyrical prose, haikus and free-form poetry in a way that fused his emotions and liberatory strategy. Nadine Gordimer described Brutus accurately: "A freedom fighter who never thought it necessary to give up being an intellectual, but combined both."



Brutus's poetry collections are:

- *Sirens Knuckles and Boots* (Mbari Productions, Ibaden, Nigeria and Northwestern University Press, Evanston Illinois, 1963).
- *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison* (Heinemann, Oxford, 1968).
- *Poems from Algiers* (African and Afro-American Studies and Research Institute, Austin, Texas, 1970).
- *A Simple Lust* (Heinemann, Oxford, 1973).
- *China Poems* (African and Afro-American Studies and Research Centre, Austin, Texas, 1975).
- *Strains* (Troubador Press, Del Valle, Texas).
- *Stubborn Hope* (Three Continents Press, Washington, DC and Heinemann, Oxford, 1978).
- *Salutes and Censures* (Fourth Dimension, Enugu, Nigeria, 1982).
- *Airs and Tributes* (Whirlwind Press, Camden, New Jersey, 1989).
- *Still the Sirens* (Pennywhistle Press, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1993).

- *Remembering Soweto*, ed. Lamont B. Steptoe (Whirlwind Press, Camden, New Jersey, 2004).
- *Leafdrift*, ed. Lamont B. Steptoe (Whirlwind Press, Camden, New Jersey, 2005).
- *Poetry and Protest: A Dennis Brutus Reader*, ed. Aisha Kareem and Lee Sustar (Haymarket Books, Chicago and University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2006).

A further volume of 70 previously unpublished poems was published by Worcester State College in May 2010.

Brutus, politically-posthumous?

The literary legacy will live on. What about the impact on our political development? After all, if Brutus was alive today, he'd be out cheering the victorious insurgent democratic forces of Tunisia and Egypt, and hoping for a bottom-up victory in, Palestine, Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq, Iran and today, Libya. Anywhere US and Israeli governments have propped up North African and Middle East leaders, Brutus could be found in solidarity with the oppressed, including one memorable trip to Lebanon to bear witness to Israel's indiscriminate bombings during its ill-fated July 2006 invasion.

In addition to the reparations case, which continues in the US courts, there are two other crucial political lessons for us in the wake of Brutus: the 2010 World Cup and 2011 world climate summit in Durban. On the first, Brutus was an unequivocal critic, and he proved prophetic during an interview for the documentary film banned by SABC, *Fahrenheit 2010*: "When you build enormous stadiums, you are shifting resources ... from building schools or hospitals and then you have these huge structures standing empty. They become white elephants." He would not have been surprised at all by the near universal reports that stadiums have become vast annual budget liabilities for nearly every major South African municipality.

He had the same foresight on the even bigger challenge that South Africa faces in November 2011, in Durban: hosting a world climate summit destined to fail, given that elites are not serious about solving the problems they have created. As Brutus put it in September 2009,

My own view is that a corrupt deal is being concocted in Copenhagen with the active collaboration of NGOs who have been bought off by the corporations, especially oil and transport. They may even be well-intentioned but they are barking up the wrong tree... we should "Seattle Copenhagen", with the left outside protesting and African elites inside denying consensus, so as to delegitimize the process and outcome, just as we did in 1999.

That was the spirit that will guide a great many Climate Justice activists when they arrive in Durban, as well as the homegrown community, environmental, women's, youth, cultural and labour movements there, as well.



They, like all of us here, and like Noam Chomsky, have enduring respect. As Chomsky put it, his friend Brutus was "a great artist and intrepid warrior in the unending struggle for justice and freedom. He will long be remembered with honour, respect, and affection, and his life will be a permanent model for others to try to follow, as best they can." Like Chomsky, most followers will find the Brutus legacy of politico-literary contributions reason to adopt the title of another poetry collection: *Stubborn Hope*.



In sum, the memory of Dennis Brutus will remain everywhere there is struggle against injustice. Uniquely courageous, consistent and principled, Brutus bridged the global and local, politics and culture, class and race, the old and the young, the red and green. He was an emblem of solidarity with all those peoples oppressed and environments wrecked by the power of capital and state elites. But in his role as a world-class poet, Brutus also taught us well, that social justice advocates can have both bread and roses.