

Professor Walker,

Imagine a table, scarcely visible beneath a tide of objects: two bowls of fruit, some luggage, a violin, a ukulele, printed fabric from Côte d'Ivoire, vases, Afro hair products, houseplants, a coffee press, a water jug, musical scores, albums by Jessye Norman and Leontyne Price, cut flowers, a cou-cou stick, a serving plate, a clock, and a patchwork quilt. To one side of the table, today's honorary graduate, Peter Brathwaite, sits. His pose, and the fluffy monkey on his shoulder, like every other object in this image, recreates a seventeenth-century painting known as *The Paston Treasure* or *Still Life with Moor and Parrot*, originally made to show off an aristocratic family's riches. Where the Paston family had an impressive globe, Peter has the luggage carried by his family when they moved from the Caribbean to England; where damask hung, there is the patchwork made by his grandmother; and where shells and a trumpet rested, there is the stick his grandfather used for making cou-cou out of cornmeal and okra.

Peter tweeted his version of *The Paston Treasure* on 22 April 2020, as part of his response to a challenge issued by the Getty Museum during the Covid-19 lockdowns: recreate an artwork using everyday items found at home. Other submissions, as Peter has written, 'exposed the depressing truth that most of the so-called great artworks we choose to platform and celebrate do not tell the stories of people of colour – the global majority.' But Peter's did. His posts carry *two* hashtags: #gettychallenge and #blackportraiture. He is still publishing new recreations now, from medieval marginalia to Kehinde Wiley's portrait of Barack Obama. The story of many of the reworked images is complex. The black man, or 'Moor', in the Paston still life was probably originally included as another object to show off, another treasure, a piece of property; yet the recreation, with its joyful and personal subversion of the original's objects also encourages us to think against the seventeenth-century aristocratic viewpoint and see that man as a person too.

You can see this recreation and others online, in a beautiful new book, and in exhibitions. If you look closely at the images, I am told that you might even see objects from costumes once worn to parties in the basement of Newcastle's Student Union. Peter studied fine art, philosophy, and music here. He was the social secretary of the Music Society, sung in the cathedral choir, and joined the Real Ale Society and the Swing Dance Society. His teachers did not mention the ale or the dancing, but they do remember the 'phenomenal stagecraft and maturity' he already showed as an undergraduate – and that he would go on to develop at the Royal College of Music as he launched a successful career as an operatic baritone, performing around Europe and the UK.

Many of these performances share with the work on black portraiture an interest in lost and marginalized stories. The cabaret shows *Degenerate Music* and *Effigies of Wickedness* brought German music of the 1920s and 30s, banned by the Nazis, to new audiences. For a chamber opera called *The Knife of Dawn*, Peter played Martin Carter, the Guyanese political activist, incarcerated without charge and on hunger strike in 1953 against the British colonial government. This show was the first production to be held at Covent Garden after the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020. Peter prepared for it while also producing daily recreations of black portraits, and penning essays for radio about the pictures he was using. They were long, exhilarating days, but everything that happened in them had the same interest and passion at its centre.

It is not easy to study the stories of the marginalized. Long unvalued, their crucial details are scattered across countless sources. Piecing the parts together demands deep and wide-ranging research. Peter is no stranger to this. Ellen McDougall, his collaborator on *Effigies of Wickedness*, described him as possessing a 'brain like an encyclopaedia'. At Newcastle, he won a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship to enable his study of the Anglican choral tradition in the USA and the Caribbean. He has researched his family's history back twenty-six generations, finding within it King Henry III, enslaved West African forebears, representatives of white plantocracy, and the gaps created by racialized prejudice. That personal history was shared as part of a work-in-progress show

called *Insurrection* at the Royal Opera House. One scene features all the books Peter read as part of his research: there were so many that they had to be transported to the theatre by taxi.

At the end of performances of *Insurrection* question and answer sessions allowed audience members to take part in the production. This was important. The show, like all of Peter's creative output, was not just about telling a story. It was about enabling and empowering people, from all walks of life, to share in and learn from that story. Schoolchildren spoke of discovering some of their own Caribbean heritage through it; questions and comments were emailed in the wake of the events; and staff at the Royal Opera House used the production to rethink their own structures and practices.

If you click on the tweet with which Peter shared his recreation of the Paston Treasure, you can see all the replies it received. Users praise the detail of the execution, calling it 'incredible' and 'astonishing'; others suggest that Peter make a book of his recreation; and even the curators of the Norwich Castle Gallery, where the original image hangs, chime in. What you can also see, though, is Peter replying, kindly and generously to every single comment. Most often, he just writes 'thank you'. Click on another recreation, go to the comments, and you will see the same thing: Peter thanking everyone for engaging with his work, and for making it not just his but theirs, and ours.

Professor Walker, for having shared so many stories with patience, generosity, rigour, and care, I present to you Peter Brathwaite as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Music, *honoris causa*.