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# Articulating Our-selves: the (extra)ordinary art of life

## Abstract

*This paper offers a dialogical engagement with Bhekizizwe Peterson's oeuvre of work through the framing of narrative subjectivity as constituted by three intertwined threads: 1) relationality; 2) temporality; and 3) embodiment (Bradbury, 2020). Peterson offers critical and creative resources for reconfiguring psychosocial praxis, persisting with the question of what it might mean to be human in dehumanising conditions. In his analytically rigorous formulation, ubuntu becomes a tool for dismantling atomised notions of individuality, rethinking subjectivity as inherently relational. The narration of these relational bonds is not restricted to the plane of the present. Narrative time disrupts linearity and Peterson theorises intergenerational life by attending to memory, particularly the traumatic repetitions of black spectrality, and imagination in the projection of alternative futures. The activation of memory and imagination in works of art offers resources for thinking and living, for the construction of culture in the flows of historical life. However, it is not only the life of the arts that Peterson theorises but the art of life, the (extra)ordinary everyday embodied practices of (extra)ordinary people. This approach to re-thinking personhood is refracted through the ambiguous notion of articulation as, on the one hand, the expression of private thought and felt meaning in public discourse, and on the other, connection, conjoining or hinging together. Narrative captures both senses of this term and offers us a way of thinking, with Peterson, not only about the arts but also about psychosocial life.*

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## Introduction

For Bhekizizwe Peterson, the life of the arts is entangled with the art of life, and as artist, intellectual and political

activist, he has much to say to the disciplinary domain of psychology. Peterson's oeuvre spans three decades and multiple modalities but, across time and form, he persists with a critical engagement with what it might mean to be human in dehumanising conditions. His scholarship is characterised by simultaneous attention to questions of aesthetics and ethics, equally resistant to the apolitical notion of 'art for art's sake' and the marshalling of the arts for crude, political posturing. He asserted the inextricable links between form and content in our meaning-making practices, arguing that *how* we articulate ourselves matters as much as what we say and that in the making of art and ideas, we are simultaneously making our-selves.

Peterson was insistent on nurturing interiority, cultivating the inner life of the mind for creating a life worth living. In this sense he was quintessentially an intellectual. But Bheki's thinking was not forged in the isolation of the academy and, together with wide and deep reading of the libraries of the academy, he crafted his understanding in dialogue with the wisdom of the elders, and the sharp critique and experimentation of young people. He was keenly alert to the politics of knowledge production and asserted the importance of each person crafting a meaningful life for herself, narrating her experience from her own perspective, and being heard and recognised by others. These possibilities for articulating ourselves can only be fully realised in conditions of "freedom in security" (Manganyi, 1973, p. 32). Living in Manganyi's imagined future, it is evident that the struggle for this world persists in the present. For Peterson, the dignity of persons is at the heart of this political and historical engagement, leading us into the terrain of psychosocial praxis.

I offer reflections on Peterson's thought and work, and the implications for psychology, by locating his contributions quite specifically in the fertile field of narrative psychology, articulating the "ontological premise that we live in story-shaped worlds" (Sarbin, 2001).[1] However, the paper is more than an intellectual exercise of intertextual and interdisciplinary engagement with Peterson's work. Bheki and I worked closely together as principal investigators of NEST (Narrative Enquiry for Social Transformation) for almost a decade and were in constant conversation about the links and divergences between our disciplines, about our thinking, working and ways of being-in-the-world. In as much as the article invites readers to reconsider the theory and practice of psychology by reading Peterson, it is simultaneously a personal reflection on how my everyday interactions with Bheki not only infused and enlivened my scholarship but also provoked me to explore different senses of self and possibilities for world-making. I invite readers into one retrospective formulation of this dialogue by thinking through Peterson's work in the frame of my own theorising of narrative subjectivity in terms of three intertwined threads (Bradbury, 2020):

1 As entry points into the field of narrative psychology, see for example, Andrews 2014; Bradbury & Miller, 2010; Bruner, 1987; Freeman, 1993; McAdams, 2001; Phoenix et al., 2021; Sarbin, 1986; Squire et al., 2008.

1. Relationality: encountering ourselves through others.

2. Temporality: the past and future in the present.

3. Embodiment: extraordinary selves in the ordinary art of life.

In the final section of the paper, this approach to re-thinking personhood is refracted through the ambiguous notion of *articulation* as, on the one hand, the expression of private thought and felt meaning in public discourse, and on the other, connection, conjoining or hinging together. Narrative captures both senses of this term and offers us a way of thinking not only about the arts but also about psychosocial life, about human subjectivity as speaking ourselves into being, in shared language in relation with others.

## RELATIONALITY: encountering ourselves through others

Bhekizizwe Peterson was a wonderfully generous interlocutor, releasing new thinking and feeling, new ways of becoming our-selves, for all those who had the joy of being in conversation with him. He was uniquely persistent in the "difficult dialogic exchanges between different generations" (2019b, p. 345), particularly complicated in the shared zone of those of who lived through apartheid and the 'hinge generation' (Hoffman, 2004) who must suffer the consequences but whose lives stretch forward beyond ours.

> All of these happenings have profound implications for the formation of subjective and political identities and they also either temper or amplify the dissonances that come with the deferred expectations of freedom. To repeat, these are deeply complex experiences to apprehend, never mind to grasp and share, particularly in the everyday conversations and silences between adults and young people. (Peterson, 2019b, p. 356)

## Ubuntu and personhood

In his contribution to James Ogude's *Ubuntu* trilogy[2], Peterson proposes restoring this much degraded concept to the heart of what it means to be human: "The contingent achievement of reciprocity, compassion, and *humaneness* are at the centre of the possible of conferment of personhood" (Peterson, 2019a, p. 92, emphasis added). The concept of ubuntu has widespread currency as encapsulating African ontology as communal rather than individual, and also features prominently in South African political discourse where it has been harnessed towards a reconciliatory ethics. The isiZulu phrase, 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanyabantu', which is the standard expanded phrasing of the concept, is loosely translated as "a person

2 Peterson's chapter, The Art of personhood: Kinship and its social challenges appears in *Ubuntu and the reconstitution of community*, the third in the series edited by James Ogude, following *Ubuntu and Personhood*, and *Ubuntu and the everyday* (co-edited with Unifer Dyer). This is a rich collection of conceptual thickening for readers to explore.

is a person through other people". However, this translation begs the question, as the idea of individual identity (or becoming 'a person') is typically understood in opposition to 'other people'. The importance of socialisation, particularly through the institutions of family and schooling, and the influences of the cultural, historical and political contexts within which individuals live, are understood to shape (or even determine) the kind of person that someone becomes. But even in the strongest determinist position, this is a very pale version of the forceful construction of personhood *through* others as articulated in the concept of Ubuntu. The fabric of social relations is not merely supportive of the development of particular kinds of persons, but is the very stuff of which persons are made, without which it is impossible to be human at all.

A person's Ubuntu or humanness is expanded, strengthened and deepened through the capacity for imaginative empathic thought (Peterson, 2012, 2019a) and acts of compassion towards or in solidarity with others, and through enlarging the scope of inclusion of others to whom we are connected and accountable. Conversely, when we fail to exercise Ubuntu when the situation demands it, or fail to recognise the humanity of the other, our own humanity is eviscerated. Our actions impact not only the lives of others but reflexively, ours too. Personhood is formed relationally and reciprocally (Bradbury, 2020).

Peterson's conception of the ethics of Ubuntu is to be distinguished from two other concepts in wide circulation in South African political discourse, reconciliation and forgiveness, which are often also linked to possibilities for psychological healing and the repair of ruptures in social relations. These ideas were central to the formation and implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), linking African ontology to the Christian framework. This amalgamated spiritual or religious schema resonated with many black people's own cosmic schema, and the process was therefore widely embraced as a route to resolving the trauma of the apartheid past. The framework assumes that an appeal to those who have exercised oppressive and violent power over others contains within it a challenge to their humanity, which can only be affirmed through recognition of the subjugated other. In his analysis of Sol Plaatje's use of the petition to represent the dire circumstances of Africans dispossessed of homes and livelihood (and hence, identity or human-being) through the Land Act of 1913, Peterson points to this potential to restore social equilibrium:

> As a dialogic form of expression, the petition is predicated on real or imagined historical, cultural or political bonds between the addresser and the addressed. … The addressed is the one who, at the moment of the petition's articulation, is inscribed as the holder of power and, upon acceptance of this assumption, is immediately put on trial by the petitioner. (Peterson, 2016a, p. 84)

The critical responsibility for reparation lies with those addressed by the petition who have the power to respond, demonstrating a willingness to be humanised by the other. As we know, Plaatje's petition to the British authorities fell on deaf ears and the apartheid machinery proceeded to lay waste to the country, instituting the particular forms of economic exploitation and political stratification that have come to be known as racial capitalism. The structural violence of these policies is fundamental, but Peterson follows Plaatje's attention to the *people* who enact this tragedy as he "compels us to reflect on humankind's disturbing ability to remain unmoved by other people's suffering" (Peterson, 2016a, p. 94).

Ubuntu requires the maintenance and repair of social relations but these are not practices of reconciliatory peace-keeping/ making. The burden of accountability is shifted from victims who are implored to forgive, to perpetrators whose own humanity is called into question by their failure to recognise the humanity of the other. Peterson (2016a, p. 84) delineates the possibilities for humanising one another, through a "symptomatic insistence on establishing social relations (and not just the patterns and structures of power and mutual obligation) between triangulated, disagreeing constituencies". However, even beyond the hierarchies of political power, or the spectacular violence of individual acts, the development of personhood is always relational and the articulation of ubuntu is an imperative in all circles of community.

Peterson insists on the recuperation of kinship networks in contrast to the nuclear family which he refers to as "fragile families" (2019b, p. 86) and draws on the artist Ernest Mancoba[3], who refers to the importance of age-cohorts as a community of equals providing a context of reciprocal responsibilities and mutual support. But he adds an important rider that refuses the conflation of communalism with the erasure of individual personhood: "At the same time, one does not lose individual freedom of action and initiative" (Mancoba, cited by Peterson, 2019a, p. 87). This emphasis on the paradoxical development of full individual autonomy within the network of communal relationality is elaborated through Peterson's insistence on *dignity* as essential to human flourishing (2012, 2019a). Personal dignity, integrity and agency are released not by escaping social constraints but by fulfilling our ethical obligations to one another.

> Self and the world are intrinsically tied in an intricate net of reciprocal relations and obligations that create the desired moral order and equilibrium between the environment, the individual, the family and society (or the extended family which, ultimately, includes all humanity). (Peterson, 2012, p. 223)

3 Ernest Mancoba (1904 – 2002). Pioneering African Modernist artist who lived most of his life in exile from South Africa in Paris. See *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Mancoba*

## Intergenerational relations: culture, community and family life

Like Plaatje's petition before it, the TRC did not provoke a recognition of human failure on the part of the powerful, individual perpetrators, or ordinary white South Africans who retained or inherited intergenerational privilege. Peterson argues that "… different forms of intervention, restoration and healing were necessary in order to counter the personal and social convulsions emanating from the inequality, inequity, violence and brutality that was symptomatic of the apartheid past" (Peterson, 2012, p. 214). He makes this argument in his writer's statement for the film, *Zulu Love Letter* (2004)[4] which was popularly received as a film about the TRC although it provides only a backdrop or foil to a much more complex, nuanced story of life in the aftermath of apartheid. The film explores other forms of psychosocial repair beyond institutional regulation, ritual and cultural practices outside of the political / legal frames of justice and of religious / medical frames of healing.

> I explored in *Zulu Love Letter* ways that centralized and validated the everyday experiences and forms of recovery used by individuals. I was particularly struck by how ordinary people, in their endeavours to grasp, deal with and overcome inequality, alienation and trauma, found succour in African spiritual and cultural rites and epistemologies. African ontology – particularly with regards to its elaboration of personhood, sociality and ancestral veneration – offered a more life affirming and enriching alternative to the dis(contents) of the narratives and projects of the state. (Peterson, 2012, p. 215)

Peterson's aesthetic presents the audience with provocation rather than resolution, articulating a world that is characterised by disarticulation and misunderstanding. The broad arc of searching for coherence in the wake of traumatic history, is explored through family life in a mother-daughter relationship. The film follows Thandeka, a journalist with writer's block, as she struggles with a difficult relationship with her deaf daughter and the everyday troubles of making a life in the city of Johannesburg. In tandem with navigating these personal and domestic practicalities, she is enlisted to help a mother search for the missing body of her murdered daughter. However, this more legible story of apartheid violence does not overshadow the seemingly more trivial questions of family life, and the two stories are shown to be poignantly intertwined. The young deaf girl's inarticulable pain is lost in translation, but her mother too is disabled, struggling not only to interpret her daughter but to articulate herself, to write and say what she means, at work and in her relationships. This breakdown in communication is poignantly contrasted with the warm relationship between Simangaliso (the daughter) and her grandmother who sings and signs and performs her love in ways that the child

4 Peterson co-wrote the screenplay for Zulu Love Letter and that of ZweliDumile with his longtime collaborator and friend, the director, Ramadan Suleman. Suleman credits Peterson with generating the 'narrative arc' of the films they made together (pers. comm, 2022).

can fully and reliably grasp. From different vantage points, both mother and daughter are "wrestling with alienation and the search for personhood" (Peterson, 2019a, p. 76).

Although *Zwelidumile* is a very different film, a documentary about an iconic artist, it is similarly thematically concerned with the quest for identity and fragmented family histories. Dumile Feni's life-story is radically disrupted by exile, leaving behind two families who only briefly meet after his tragic death. The film includes multiple interviews with Feni's friends conducted in the intimate comfort of their homes, each person sharing stories of Dumile, sometimes photographs, accreting patchwork details of his life, as a young man in Johannesburg, in London where he lived and worked in a community of South African artists and musicians, and in New York where he later died. This is a story of an exceptional artist who was finally recognised and celebrated, but it is told through the eyes of his daughter Marriam who attempts to recreate the life of her unknown father. The film opens with a close-up of her face etched with melancholic grief. Towards the end of the film, she tells us that the first time she sees her father is also the first time she sees a dead body. She is aware of the pejorative reaction of people to her emotional collapse: 'she didn't know him, why is she crying?' Her clear insight is that this was in fact why she was crying, because she did not know him and now the potential to know him was forever lost. Although he is an enigma to her, he remains a central imaginative reference point for her own sense of self. She says, 'He was large to me, he was like … Big'.

While Marriam's search for her father is the narrative spine of the film, it is Feni's sister, Kuli, who features in his art and through whom we learn something of his own childhood. The film allows us to eavesdrop on an unedited conversation, including complaints about the temperature of the glass of water that the old woman is given to drink while she talks. In a very basic kitchen, the elderly woman lists Dumile along with her six siblings and recollects a child who was 'always drawing'. She initially tells us that he left school in Standard 2 (Grade 4) but is corrected by her sister-in law who laughs in embarrassment, although her correction to Standard 5 (Grade 7) still reveals a very low level of formal schooling. The unreliability of memory and good-natured family disagreements serve to support rather than undermine the truthfulness of this version of Feni's life. However, this version is not presented as an anchor with any greater veracity than the flamboyant figure brought to life in the colourful living rooms of his exiled artist friends. More difficult to resolve is the competing claim of the 'other family', Marriam and her mother, whose existence was unknown to his family of origin before he died. The film switches between the kitchen and the other family at the gravesite, fixing Dumile's name, and there is a sense of tension as Kuli tells of being visited by 'bad dreams' that she feels may be a sign of ancestral disquiet about Feni's body not being buried with his kin. These ruptures in the ancestral realm are explored in *Zulu Love Letter* through the anguished limbo of Dineo's mother who is desperate to find her daughter's murdered body and lay her to rest.

We do not hear or see much of Feni himself in the documentary, glimpsing him only through the eyes of others. But there is a playful insert in which he refuses to follow an exasperated interviewer's simple instruction to state his name for the camera. He says, 'I have many names' and then offers a seemingly tangential account of the ancient artistic practices of San societies, inserting himself into this lineage as a more legitimate form of identification. In this ostensibly flippant and frivolous response, Feni voices Peterson's Pan-Africanism, encompassing a continental 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1987) through the long durée of history that escapes colonial framing. Through his scholarly and creative work, Peterson thus offers us a complex theorisation and political mobilisation of relational selves with "… an emphasis on a very subtle and expansive intimation of the idea of *humanity,* one that encompasses senses of self (identity), experience (history) and the need to preserve our moral uprightness or goodness" (Peterson, 2019a, p. 83, emphasis in the original).

## TEMPORALITY: colliding pasts and futures in the present

Theorising human life in narrative terms challenges the linearity of individual development, and even the large, temporal frames of history. Notions such as post-apartheid or post-colonialism misleadingly imply that the past can be demarcated by datelines that release us into the open territory of present life. By contrast, psychotherapeutic praxis assumes that accumulated life experiences, even prelinguistic experiences inaccessible to memory, do not provide an inert substrate but rather function as active elements of psychic life that constraint conscious processes of thought, action and experience. These individual life histories are entangled with the collective flow of what we more usually term 'history' where events have an impact on humanity or smaller collective subsets of people. These impacts are not free-floating and even when they are not immediately consciously apprehended, are infused into the lives of individual people. This infusion happens either through direct or indirect material impacts, or more often, through the intergenerational transmission of culture, in texts, practices such as ritual and performance, and objects or tools, and most importantly, through the talk of parents, teachers and others of the older generation. In this way, we both gift and burden the young with our experience. We must all engage in multiple time zones simultaneously, as the cultural (or historical) narrative fragments and coalesces, presenting us with views, to borrow from Ratele (2019), of how the world looks from here, now.

## Narrative time: past, present and future

Narrative is by definition, a retrospective sense-making process, whereby the meaning of the past is read through the events and experiences of the present. But narrative is more than a representation of the recollected events of life. Our inner psychological life is generated in story form, oscillating back-and-forth in time and creating meaningful connections between recollected memories, present experience, and imagined futures. These temporal lines of individual life are intertwined with the longer durations of human

life. In the first few decades of the 21st century, these shifts, twists and turns seem to occur at ever increasing speeds, threatening both the retention of memory and past traditions, and questioning what, if anything, the young have to learn from the older generation.

Narrative lives are temporal but do not unfold along simple chronological lines from past through the moment of the present towards the horizon of the future. Unlike embodied experience which always leans forward into the future and can never be reversed, narrative time oscillates and we find ourselves in a vortex where the past and future collide in the present. The narrative psychologist Molly Andrews (2014) refers to human subjects as perpetual 'time travellers' traversing the psychological terrain through the mediums of memory and imagination. These temporal zones of past and future are made present through the power of language that narrates these now-finished or yet-to-be realities into being. This capacity makes the intergenerational transmission of culture possible and indeed is the force that makes culture possible at all (Bradbury 2020; Miller, 2014; Vygotsky 1986). We are historical beings not because we inherit a world built in the past, but because we are connected to the generations that came before us and to those not yet living.

Instead of attempting to control the chaos of lived time by organising events into an orderly plot, the film narratives of both *Zulu Love Letter* and *Zwelidumile* embrace the fragmentation of reality in their form, transporting the viewer between disparate places on fast moving trains and in the subways of cities of exile, or in unreliable cars along dusty roads that connect farms and the bright lights of Johannesburg at home. As Peterson (2012, p. 228) comments on these artistic choices:

> Similarly, we favoured strategies of visual composition that, like the film's thematic concerns, allowed for a plurality of temporalities, presences and generic styles (from realism to fantasy) to co-exist within the same frame or sequence. … All these aesthetic strategies were to suggest possible multiple and contending apprehensions and meanings, all, hopefully, aiding in destabilizing established patterns of recognition, association and interpretation.

## Black spectrality and traumatic memory

This splintered vision of the present is refracted through traumatic memory, sometimes recollected but most often unconsciously activated. Peterson (2019b) reworks Freud's notion of melancholia as hauntology or spectrality, resonating with the notions of political unconscious (Jameson, 1975) and narrative unconscious (Freeman, 2010).

> The lived experiences of black people – the melancholic imagination posits – seems to be marked by the, seemingly, intractable co-existence of asymmetrical and racialized power relations, exploitative social conditions and subjection and

> that generate fraught and incongruent senses of self, sociality, temporalities and visions. (Peterson, 2019b, p. 346)

Narrative stretches the arc of living memory through revisiting well-known historical events from the perspective of those who lived through them and excavating more quotidian events and practices that may be neglected and eclipsed by totalising political narratives or by the careless imposition of the disciplinary theories of human life with which we are more familiar. Christina Sharpe (2016) evokes the polysemous metaphor of 'the wake' to create an extraordinary, multilayered narrative. She simultaneously references the largescale drama of the dragging, churning agitated currents of water behind the slave ships of the past; the intimate mourning practices of families in the present who suffer too many losses through the omission of care or the commission of violence; and the anxious wakefulness of insomnia in anticipation of restless futures. The present reality of violence against black bodies is infused with traumatic memory, and we are confronted with the "difficulties of 'closing the book' whether on the past or on *the inequities of the present*" (Peterson, 2012, p. 221, emphasis added).

It is imperative to narrate not only the past or the broad sweep of history, but unfolding events that generate history in the present, directing our attention "forwards to the future rather than always backwards to the past" (2019b, p. 352). Peterson turned his analytic lens on the 2015 – 2016 student uprising, finding traces and resonances with the past in the perpetual conditions of precarity and in the performance of protest culture in sit-ins, marches, songs, rallying slogans, the foot-stomping movement of the toyi-toyi and the raised fists of black-power salutes (Peterson, 2016b). In particular, "the *toyi-toyi* not only inaugurates and occupies spaces that are under contestation, it also transforms them into sites of confrontation where some form of denouement (whether physical or ideological, temporary or long-term) between the activists and the authorities must crystallise" 2019b, p. 359). While he often shared the frustrations of his peers with how the younger generation's critique of the democratic dispensation sometimes seems dismissively ignorant of the overtly brutal forms of oppression that their parents endured, he was keenly attuned to the traces of that violent past in the present and unusually aware of his own generation's ignorance of the political and creative contours of young people's worlds. He celebrated the expressive power of the musical genre of kwaito to articulate the creativity of late capitalism's 'hustle' culture and to problematise mutating masculinities (Peterson, 2003; Hlasane & Peterson, 2002). He recognised the spectre of racial violence in the everyday indignities and structural violence of young black people's lived experiences.

> The students' protest foregrounded a wide range of experiential and affective everyday modalities that tend to remain invisible and intangible for many, and particularly, older adult, citizens. In addition to the systemic daily reproductions

> of poverty, inequality and injustice, young blacks have to, as a matter of banal routine, negotiate, rather than circumvent their senses of self, belonging and mobility because of the constant surveillance, profiling, stoppages, searches, interrogations and other forms of visceral violence that they are subjected to. (Peterson, 2019b, p. 360)

By juxtaposing events separated in time, Peterson destabilises linear explanations of the present and renders the archive itself as a temporal process rather than an inert structure. He calls on the older generation to be 'moved' (Bradbury, 2012) by witnessing the struggles of the youth and to bring the past into 'ethical dialogue' with the present (Kiguwa, pers. comm.). The role of audiences (readers, listeners or viewers) is thus activated in iterative searching cycles of meaning-making that connect the events of recorded or remembered history with the embodied present world which was once an (un)imagined future.

## EMBODIMENT: the art of everyday life

A literary scholar and film-maker, an intellectual, who loved the world of books, arts, music, who lived his life in the academy, Bheki was insistently attentive to what he termed "intimate publics (especially familial and community ones)" (Peterson, 2019b, p. 346) and to what Amile Cabral (1977) termed the practices of 'culture as resistance'. In *Zwelidumile* the exceptional vision of Dumile Feni's art is intertwined with the lives of other well-known visual artists and musicians (e.g. Lois Moholo, Omar Badsha, Julian Bahula, Mongane Wally Serote), who tell stories of his life in exile and at home, an (extra) ordinary life narrated in many voices. While the film crosses wide geographical and temporal terrains, providing searing political commentary and a remarkable imaginative artistic vision, Peterson's lens is always focused on the intimate relationships of family, love and loss. His focus is on culture and the arts as intertwined in everyday life, in the "social convulsions and tactile memories" (2022, p. 329) in the present. In the film, exile is the literal condition of estrangement from home, but this condition is experienced anywhere where black lives are either physically or symbolically displaced, where people do not feel 'at home' in the world or with each other.

It is perhaps in his creative work that we find Peterson's strongest feminist voice, centring the family in ways that challenge patriarchy even while celebrating the creative genius of Dumile Feni. Although the artists interviewed are mainly men, they are interviewed in their homes, often together with their wives, and the vantage point on Feni's story belongs to his estranged daughter, through whose sad eyes we see him. Unlike Dumile Feni and his fellow artists, the characters of *Zulu Love Letter* are unknown and fictionalised 'ordinary' people, living lives of quiet desperation. It is a story of women, grandmothers, mothers and daughters, in fractured relationship with one another and with men and with the social world, but continuously engaged in difficult acts of

repair. Sometimes these acts are clearly significant, such as Thandeka and Me'Tau's mission to find Dineo's body and give her a proper burial, but mostly they are small, family practices, cooking and driving, and showing up for work; finding ways to connect with Simangaliso by singing and signing, or in a shopping trip that ends with playfully running from a security guard through the Oriental Plaza. The intergenerational nature of their trauma is articulated in the apartheid generation's suffering, with Me'Tau unable to rest without laying Dineo to rest, and Thandeka trapped in writer's block, suffering nightmarish flashbacks that reveal the links between the women's stories. The younger generation chafe with frustration against their traumatised mothers, trying to make ordinary lives for themselves and fighting their own battles. Dineo's younger sister just wants the constant rituals of the wake in her house to end, while Thandeka is desperate for the 'wake in her head' to end. Simangaliso transposes the violence of the world into her school artwork and quietly stitches the beautiful beaded loveletter of the film's title. Her drawing and embroidery articulates that which cannot be said (Segalo, 2014) rendering her life legible (Phoenix, 1991) for the audience and herself. Although both films portray the grand apartheid narrative of violent atrocities on home soil and of exile, they offer us nuanced textured accounts of everyday worlds under apartheid and its aftermath. These narratives remind us that "[t]he real horror of apartheid is that for four decades its inhumanity and brutality were ordinary, were everyday" (Hayes, 1998, p. 38).

## Visceral embodiment

Because *Zwelidumile* is a film about an artist, it is perhaps self-evident that it is a vehicle for showing his work. However, although we do see a lot of his paintings, these are spliced between talk about Dumile the person rather than commentary by art critics, and so we glimpse the threads of the ordinary world transposed into art. The first interview of the film is with Radhulda Abudkar who speaks to us with a cat on her lap, this domestic creature transformed in Feni's artwork. She describes Dumile's struggles with diabetes and poverty, and tells how he would sleep rough in the subway where often the police would confiscate his needles, assuming they were the paraphernalia of a drug addict. Through her, we have a sense of Dumile Feni's life in exile as characterised by "the range of daily struggles that poor people have to contend with, especially the everyday tribulations that subject them to experiences of humiliation and indignity that obliterate their self-esteem" (Peterson, 2012, p. 220).

The film is visually and sonically rich, moving between the intimate private spaces of the artfully decorated homes of people interviewed, to the colourful, noisy public streets of London, New York, Johannesburg and Cape Town. The interviews are casual but highly crafted, with many close-ups of faces, bringing into focus not only Feni himself, but multiple other characters that peopled his life. Abdullah Ibrahim's soundtrack opens up artistic vistas of melancholic nostalgia and affective longing for home. The film works to engage our senses to create an embodied world which is so difficult to capture in textual

language on the page. Feni's heartbroken friend, Nina Bergman describes the moment of his calamitous death in a shop where he frantically grabs at a rack of CDs which crash to the floor with him. But she also recollects Sundays spent eating fried chicken on the stoep with neighbours in a house that was always filled with music when Feni lived there, now silent, closed-up and ostensibly deserted. She demystifies the great artist, describing how they sat on the floor of her lounge, working together on the light and lovely tutu-clad dancers of his final sequence. And her face crumples as she gazes across the river, recalling the political squabbling that erupted around her friend's death, saying simply, 'I miss him'.

In the interviews with old men, they nostalgically recollect their youthful selves in the company of Dumile Feni. Julian Bahula (Mr B) tells us that they were both 'sharp and handsome' and shows us pictures to prove it, including a beautiful iconic shot of Feni and Louis Moholo in stylised Xhosa blankets and dashing hats. Moji Mokone tells us how he had 'no clue' about art but accompanied Dumile to exhibitions for the cheese and wine, and then comments on Feni the fashionista who 'liked shoes', laughing and repeating, 'he liked shoes, Dumile liked shoes!' Despite the self-deprecating humour in this telling, there are more serious seeds of desire in these stylised expressions of their younger selves. In an account of his own (and other black adolescent boys') longing for 'hot shoes' (*amateki ashisayo*), Kopano Ratele (2016) suggests that embodied stylisation articulates an "axis of meaning for some models of masculinity" (Ratele, 2016, p. 23) "render[ing] them visible, lovable and secure" (Ratele, 2016, p. 25).

These youthful sexy word-pictures are interspliced with black and white footage of apartheid violence to remind the viewer that Feni's journey to London was an agonising enforced exile rather than an entertaining tourist trip. The photographer Omar Badsha describes parties at home, several of which were 'going away' parties for Dumile, which happened under threat from the police, breaking multiple petty bylaws by partying, drinking and loving across the colour line, reminding us of the everyday surveillance and violent control of apartheid. Together with the sound of helicopters and chilling footage of Verwoerd describing apartheid as 'good neighbourliness' while we see police beating and shooting black bodies in the street, we understand with Badsha how urgent it was for Feni to leave South Africa when he did. While life abroad enabled Feni and the other exiled artists to live and create art, the alienation from home was excruciatingly painful, embodied agony. Moji Mokone describes how on his return he takes a ride in a taxi, deliberately squeezing himself between the two fattest women in the backseat, so that he can breathe in the 'aroma' of their sweaty armpits – the sweet smell of home!

## Loss and unresolved futures

Both *Zulu Love Letter* and *Zwelidumile* are affective, sensory works that cannot be reduced to plotlines but nonetheless shape the processes of emotion through narrative

discourse (Sarbin, 2001). The films conclude with commemorations of the dead but without the promise of closure or complete resolution. Dumile Feni is feted and celebrated with his sculpture of *History* ceremonially installed at the South African Constitutional Court in Johannesburg. Albie Sachs, who commissioned the installation for the ANC, speaks at length about the power of the work and how it appropriately carries the weight of our oppressive past at this crucial site of the new democratic order. There is a celebratory air with beautifully dressed dignitaries including Sachs, Chief Justice Pius Langa, the poet laureate, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, and First lady, Zanele Mbeki, welcoming Feni's daughter, Marriam and her mother. However, although this event marks the destiny of Feni, the artist, Dumile the man returns 'home in a box to people who never knew him'. He is buried in home soil and his grave lovingly tended by family who claim him as father and husband, but his sister Kuli and his family of origin must live without him, taken by the political establishment, artistic fame and by another family, the perpetual dis-ease of him never returning home to his kin, alive or dead.

In *Zulu Love Letter*, after the terror of running screaming through the streets in search of her daughter after the car crash that kills her father, Thandeka finds her collapsed behind the bars of her flat balcony. Her relief is overwhelming and she tearfully repeats 'I am sorry, I am sorry', an expression not only of sympathy on Simangaliso's loss of her beloved father and the terrifying experience of the crash, but also of regret and apology for everything that has come before, for failing to collect her from school, for her half-hearted attempts at learning to sign, and even for her deafness that is the consequence of Thandeka's torture at the hands of apartheid police. She says sorry but what is done cannot be undone.

While the past cannot be erased or atoned for, the narrative does offer some threads of possibility for creativity in the present. Thandeka now joins her daughter to complete the beautiful beaded loveletter that she has been making, gathering it together with baskets of fruit as a gift to Dineo's grieving family who can finally perform the last rites of rest for their murdered daughter. The women are dressed in mourning black in stark contrast to the saturated colour of the love letter, a sensuous, visceral beauty in sorrow. Accompanied by the traditional song *Masithandazo* (let us pray) the family lays Dineo to rest, ending the repetitive rites of mourning in the family's house and perhaps quietening the nightmare of Thandeka's memories. Peterson suggests that art may enable us to repair (at least some of) the ruptures in the social fabric and in our relationships with intimate others, stitching together ordinary lives from the remnants of memory. This is an alternative practice that does not necessitate the forms of final truths, forgetting and forgiveness insisted upon by religious or legal frameworks.

> Simangaliso's 'Love Letter' suggests the therapeutic role of bead-work and the arts, especially their capacity to foster love and healing through memory-work.

> The film is an extension of this idea. It is an attempt at the public and interactive commemoration of the violence of the past, keeping it alive in the national consciousness as to, in its own small way, serve as an archive and a deterrent against a repeat of the violent history it engages. It is, ultimately, also a ceremony, tribute and gift to victims and survivors. (Peterson, 2012, p. 231)

## ARTICULATION: the life of the arts and intergenerational futures

The vehicle for Suleman and Peterson's creative work, for the uncanny provocations that they provide us for rethinking the world, was the production company, *Natives at Large*. The name encapsulates Bheki's sense of humour and perspicacious analysis, laughing at the pejorative establishment label of 'native', seriously reclaiming it and staking identity on African soil that would never appeal to authority for legitimation or legibility. Beyond conventional political and disciplinary strictures, art enables people to articulate (or express) their everyday experience, narrating their own psychosocial 'truths'. This authentic scripting of embodied life-worlds is powerfully important, but the process of narration also generates a kind of psychosocial elasticity, creating new relational and temporal articulations (or connections) across lines of difference. This transformative potential is particularly crucial in prevailing conditions of precarity, grief and loss, where "disasters suspend futurity, effectively compelling us to accept catastrophe as everyday reality" (Musila, 2023, p. 327).

As Chinua Achebe (1988) says, art provides us with 'a second handle on reality'. Chabani Manganyi (2011, p. 9) similarly argues for the possibility of transposing the violent reveries of traumatic histories into art: "In the realms of art, the dream and reverie, nothing is beyond reach, impossible or inconceivable". Peterson alerts us to the ways in which the arts not only reflect the past and tell the stories that end in the present but "anticipate" futures (2019b, p. 350). This prophetic function of the arts, which works both backwards and forwards, pre-empts the developments of history and loosens the sedimentation of present realities. In this way, narrative is not a fictive alternative to 'scientific' or theoretical forms of knowledge but works to animate all knowledge-making and forms of representation. In Peterson's words:

> Narrative and the imagination, then, even in their flights of fantasy, are important catalysts in the production of knowledge, ideology and identity, especially because of the dextrous ways in which they allow for complex calibrations of the articulations between time, space, social life and action. (Peterson, 2019b, p. 347)

In many different places, (e.g. 2012, 2016a, 2019b, 2022), Peterson argues against the view that history is the 'bedrock' of the arts, forming a kind of truthful substrate from which creative work is crafted or in terms of which life must be lived. In his view, the imaginative practices of meaning-making are always activated in the

making of history, and history continues to happen in the present tense. Similarly, the traditions of knowledge-making do not provide a stable set of foundations or inert materials from which to construct new knowledge and are better thought of in Gadamer's (1975) terms as 'flows of tradition' that each subsequent generation enters, redirecting and altering these flows by swimming with, and against, existing currents. The arts provide multimodal vehicles for the expression (articulation) of private thought and felt meaning in public discourse. By transposing experience, articulating even that which seems unsayable (or even unknowable), the arts provide impetus for new trains of thought and forms of understanding. Narratives that traverse (and transgress) geographical and historical boundaries demonstrate the contingency of that which has come to be taken-for-granted, suggesting alternatives even in their 'flights of fancy'.

In relation to the *Foundational African Writers*, Peterson argues for this view of the arts as more than representational, providing more than a commentary on the socio-political contours of place and time. He frames the life of the arts and these legendary artists in terms of the critical *psychosocial* question of "… what constitutes the human and personhood in their aesthetic and quotidian lives" (2022, p. 340). Mirroring these concerns in his own artistic work, Peterson creates narrative articulations of the arts and ordinary life, public politics and personal relationships, the long duration of history with the present and imagined futures.

> What was at stake was much more than the commitment to political struggles for freedom. It involved the immensely more complicated task of imagining, thinking through and calibrating past and future senses and ways of being: dilemmas and aspirations that were tied to questions of cosmology, knowledge, culture and structures of feeling. (2022, p. 345)

Each of these celebrated centennial writers (Mphahlele, Abrahams, Jabavu and Nyembezi) offer us imaginatively drawn and incisive critique of colonial oppression and particularly, black life under apartheid and in exile, but in Peterson's reading and re-writing, these historical textual worlds are portals to reimagining ways of being human. The anguished loss of home in exile, (which was the fate of all except Nyembezi) generates an expansive Pan-African sensibility in the textures of black life, providing resources for humanising the world – they write as if their very lives are at stake. The task to narrate our selves and our worlds is not the special preserve of artists. However, artists can offer us exceptional creative imaginative individual readings of the world that help us to see / hear / speak differently about our everyday experiences and even entice us to enter the worlds of others separated from us by time, place and multiple other lines of difference. From this perspective, art is not a decorative luxury overlaid on the material world of political struggle, but the very medium of our lives. Through their

writing, these centennial authors offer resources for survival and resistance but also, for the imaginative articulation of alternatives.

The complexity of human life and the difficulties in crafting conditions of "freedom in security" (Manganyi, 1973, p. 32) should not be underestimated and demand interpretive and analytic rigour. Peterson challenges us to search for these resources in disciplinary traditions (particularly those typically eclipsed by dominant discourses) but also beyond, in the contemporary practices of culture and the textured worlds of everyday life. The characters of *Zulu Love Letter* are not only symbolic roles but "also serve as aesthetic subjects whose mere presence, identities and daily rhythms and rituals unsettle the rationality of the national political imaginaries" (Peterson, 2012, p. 221). In the chaotic traffic of the streets of Johannesburg, several taxis carry an enigmatic slogan on their back bumpers: 'Umuntu incwadi engafundeki'. Loosely translated as 'A person is a book that cannot be read', this truth unsettles our certainties and challenges us to embrace the difficult task of not only reading the word, but also the world (Freire, 1987), our-selves and others. The arts may provide recognition and validation, yet simultaneously provoke change by defamiliarizing the familiar, as captured so beautifully by Toni Morrison:

> We go to art sometimes for safety, for a haven of order, serenity; for recognisable, even traditional beauty; for anticipation with certainty that the art form will take us past our mundane selves into a deepness where we also reside. We go, sometimes, to art for danger; to be riveted by experiencing the strange, by understanding suddenly how uncanny the familiar really is. We go to be urged, shaken into reassessing thoughts we have taken for granted; to learn other ways of seeing, hearing. To be excited. Stirred. Disturbed. (Toni Morrison, 2019, pp. 287–288)

The storied lives of others, in text or talk, image or music, open new unfamiliar worlds for us but are also critical provocations to read our familiar worlds and ourselves, differently. The idea of equitable dialogical exchange is often posed as antithetical to scholarly reading and writing, especially when authors are distant in time and space, or in the figurative sense, 'out of reach'. By contrast, Peterson the scholar was always simultaneously Prof Bheki in the classroom and Bheki the colleague in conversation and in the contestation of ideas. For him, the imperative to decolonise the academy cannot be satisfied by an Africanisation project that aims to substitute 'ebony towers' (Adebayo, 2018) for the ivory towers of colonial education. It is the isolation of the metaphorical tower that Peterson problematises, arguing for making the boundaries between the academy and the world more porous. Articulating these worlds of meaning-making may enlarge our scope for dialogical and dialectical understanding, providing new threads for narrating our subjectivity.

## In conclusion

All people are engaged in the cultural acts of making meaningful lives, in the narration of themselves into being, making sense in senseless and incensing times. We may rely on artists and intellectuals to reveal the structure of the world that we have inherited, and sculpt new forms for thinking, but cultural practices encompass the planting of gardens and tending of graves, the whispered prayers of the elderly and the lullabies of weary parents, the toyi-toyi of workers, the players and spectators of the beautiful game, family recipes and fashionista selfies. Every small child who learns who talk and every young student who learns to speak new disciplinary languages reflects the complexity of narrative subjectivity, articulating themselves, knowing and being in the world through memory and imagination. As psychologists, we are enjoined to follow Peterson as he extends the lines 'outside the box' drawn by Njabulo Ndebele's (1986) project of 'remaking the ordinary'. The very ordinariness of everyday human life is extraordinary and warrants our curiosity and awe. The discipline of psychology can be put to work not only in the conventional formulations of individualised therapeutic repair, but in understanding, strengthening and extending the agency and meaning-making of (extra) ordinary people, theorising and humanising life in dehumanising conditions.

I want to conclude with a quote that reflects both Peterson's position and Bheki's person, in affirming "… the *stubborn* manner in which Africans continue[d] to pursue essential human needs (such as comfort, compassion, love and dignity) and the means of life" (2012, p. 219, emphasis added). This is the remarkable, extraordinary capacity of ordinary human life, to persist in meaning-making, to do the work of articulation even when the world and our lives seem inarticulable. Bhekizizwe Peterson's attitude of generous curiosity towards both cultural archives and everyday lived-lives, and his creative reworking of these worlds in textual and visual narratives, releases potential for new ways of living and knowing. While the devastating legacy of oppressive histories is reinscribed in the present, activating memory and imagination may offer resources for transformative praxis rather than mere survival or resilience, articulating hopeful futures crafted by human agency in cultural practices for freedom.

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