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Abstract

Bhekizizwe (Bheki) Peterson was an African literary scholar, filmmaker, artist, and community activist. While all accurate descriptors, to describe him thus leaves absent his underlying project of Black Love. It is love that is present in his project of recovery of Black intellectual and cultural legacies; in his teaching and mentorship marked by intergenerational dialoguing in a joint quest for freedom; and it is love in his injunction to challenge our rigid disciplinary imaginations of interior lives and social imaginaries that attend to the "continuities and discontinuities between past, present and future" (Peterson, 2019b, p. 345). In this paper, I think with Bheki on 1) the act of writing; 2) African ontology's relevance for trauma and healing and 3) the moral template of personhood as part of his 'buzzing' against disciplinary imaginaries. This paper is an invitation to re-imagine disciplinary boundaries by orientating psychology to the scholarship of Bhekizizwe Peterson, and to take up his questions on the narratable subject and complexities of personhood. I consider Bheki's reflection on the act of writing and implications of narratable subjects that are part of a moral economy of what it means to be human.

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Introduction

In considering the limits and possibilities of literary critique, Rita Felski's question: *"Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?" (2015, p. 13)* may be read as a frustration against the dominant sidelining of questions of connection and love in lieu of questions of power and conflict. For Felski, a turn to questions sans power and conflict "is not to abandon politics for aesthetics. It is, rather, to contend that both art

and politics are also a matter of connecting, composing, creating, coproducing, inventing, imagining, making possible: that neither is reducible to the piercing but one-eyed gaze of critique" (p. 18). This paper invites readers in psychology to re-imagine beyond our disciplinary gaze of critique by orientating the discipline to the scholarship of Bhekizizwe Peterson (1961-2021) and to take up his questions on complexities of personhood and imagination. Bhekizizwe (Bheki) Peterson was an African literary scholar, filmmaker, artist, and community activist. To simply describe him thus, however, leaves absent his underlying project of Black Love that threads across his oeuvre of scholarship and activism. It is love that is present in his project of recovery of Black intellectual and cultural legacies; in his pedagogies of teaching and learning, marked by consistent intergenerational dialoguing, in a joint quest for freedom; and it is love in his injunction to us all to challenge rigid disciplinary imaginations concerned with the "continuities and discontinuities between past, present and future" (Peterson, 2019b, p. 345). Psychology's interest and focus on questions of interiority and social imaginaries is an important site from which to take up both his challenge and invitation. Peterson's concern with the ways that subjects not only constitute their worlds but are also in turn constituted by and through the worlds that they inhabit and imagine, makes him a critical voice to think alongside. Grappling with and perhaps somewhat stilted in our current vocabularies and imaginations of identity, difference and the complexities of political and social oppression, the paper makes an argument for turning outside of the discipline, as it were, toward other registers of interiority and sociality that may help us re-imagine humanity.

The question of how we access each other is also a question of how we recognize each other. That is, how we recognize humanity not only in ourselves but in others, especially those others who appear vastly different from us. These questions are intricately connected to what we do with the past and how we imagine futures. Of course, the nub here is that both temporalities of past and future are lived in the present. Peterson's ensemble of questions that characterize his life's scholarship grapple with complex gestures of access and recognition. It is perhaps telling that this life's scholarship has by necessity traversed academic and public intellectual spaces, literature, visual arts, film, and theatre. Through his life's work, Peterson has endeavored to visualize, think, theorize, imagine, write, practice and perform the complex yet simple question of what it means to be human and free.

Two framing quotes, worth repeating here at length, situate this introduction to what I frame as his Black love project evident in his life's work. The first is Peterson's own response at a roundtable on his film *Zulu Love Letter* (2004)[1]. He said:

> How do we grasp, feel, live, remember, and depict experience? Particularly if, at times, life veers between the affirming and pleasurable (of various types) to

1 Co-written and produced with Ramadan Suleman.

> desires, pains, and loss (of many kinds) that are deeply present and resonant not only in our pasts but also in the dreams, affects, disparities, precarities, and deaths that please, sustain, and trouble our souls and bodies? How do we maintain the ideas and live the forms of kinship and solidarities (ancestral, familial, communal, continental, and global) that remain crucial even though they may be fragile, suffocating, and even deemed retrograde and transgressive? The film […] was created *as a love letter to those who passed on and those still tasked with creating a better future for all*". (Peterson, 2021, pp. 2-3, my emphasis)

The second quote is taken from his public seminar lecture that was part of the 2008 University of Cape Town's *Black Archives and Intellectual Histories* seminar series. In a response to an audience question on the widening gap between the generations on political and social issues, Peterson responded:

> How to understand the fractious relationship, the intergenerational relationship that we are having within the Black communities. And part of that has got to do with the elderly always wanting to tell you where we come from, […] tell you what happened. All the things that basically do not engage with promoting conversation and critical debate and so on. *It is not the good old days we need to remember, but the bad new ones …* (Peterson, 2018, my emphasis)

In these two framing quotes, I locate Peterson's love project: his is a concern with love's expression not just in the interpersonal realm but more importantly in the social and political domains. His project is thus one of recovery of marginalized, distorted, and erased histories and biographies. It is also about the centrality of love in the pursuit of freedom in/for Black subjects. He joins a critical scholarship here in thus locating love as fundamental to freedom. bell hooks (2000) remains a foremost advocate for the centring of love politics in social movements and revolutions. Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) has also observed that at the heart of many social movements exists a collective yearning for freedom and love. Similarly, Harrison, Phillips & Jackson state that "For Black people, love is not just about what we do but what we work to undo" (2022, p. 16). Part of Peterson's undoing work, and in reaching across the gap to a young generation grappling with old and new questions of access and recognition, is to think and imagine together the times of our lives. The urgency of troubling these times of unrest, uncertainty, and disregard (and their entwined affective economies of despair, hate, rage and melancholy) under PINS his overarching project of interrogating theory, politics and activism as these seek to remember, imagine and create pasts, presents and futures. Bhekizizwe's love project resonates with the love project espoused in the theory and activism of Black and African feminists (see Kiguwa, 2003b). It is espoused in the current endeavours of reclamation amongst many proponents of African psychology that seek to reclaim dignity and healing from traumatised histories. Simply put,

the Black love project imagines a world not organized in violence and epistemic erasure but rather one that attends with care and empathy to the project of recovery (Kiguwa, 2003b).

My own co-option of Bheki[2] is that of the Socratic gadfly[3], challenging disciplinary silos of knowledge production with the injunction that we can be and should do better. I want to think with Bheki on *1)* the act of writing; *2)* African ontologies for healing trauma; *3)* the *moral template* of personhood as part of his 'buzzing' against disciplinary imaginaries. In dialogue with his texts, *Sol Plaatje's Native Life in South Africa: Melancholy Narratives, Petitioning Selves and the Ethics of Suffering* (2008), *Dignity, memory and the future under siege* (2012) and *The Art of Personhood: Kinship and Its Social Challenges* (2019), I consider Bheki's reflection on the act of writing as a gesture toward petitioning others also implicated within a moral economy that determines what it means to be human. What does it mean to petition one another, to narrate ourselves and others as human, and what would it mean to return to Ubuntu with specific reference to its "moral template" (Peterson, 2019a, p. 92).

Petitioning Selves: the *act* of writing

Dr Mandla Langa frames his 2022 Nadine Gordimer public lecture, *The Vocabulary of Witnesses*, as "*an appeal* for all of us in this country to play our part as witnesses who are also activists and truth tellers […] This call is even more vital for young people" (my emphasis). In this 'appeal' to imagined subjects, old and young, Langa envisions subjects who not only cultivate aspirations for a different future but also work toward this future in the present moment. Langa's assembled but also imagined subjects embody a capacity for imagining *beyond* the present as much as they also embody the capacity to *refuse* this present and its current imaginations. His appeal, although simple in form, is a rather complex one: to imagine anew and with the moral agency to practice refusal, a subject must be able to recognize another as human at the very least. Such a subject must equally be able to practice ethical responsibility that is part of bearing witness to our current moment. This ethical responsibility must further strive to engage a distant future not yet lived, or in some cases, even imagined. Peterson's injunction to remember the 'bad new days' we live in as part of witnessing is a similar appeal to speaking truth to power and working across differences toward a less oppressive future.

As part of his own witnessing, Peterson excavates both Sol Plaatje as representative figure and his (Plaatje's) classic 1916 text *Native Life in South Africa*[4], to reflect on the act

2 I use his colloquial name as he was fondly known by.

3 Famously introduced by Socrates during his trial, who described himself as a gadfly, sent to cause disruption in corrupt State politics. The gadfly is a person who interferes with the status quo of a society or community by posing novel, potentially upsetting questions, usually directed at authorities.

4 Plaatje's text documents the life for many Black South Africans living under colonial and apartheid governance as informed by the Land Act of 1913.

of writing as a form of petition. In the genre of the petition, Peterson argues, an ethical imperative to write becomes evident. Written during the First World War, *Native Life in South Africa* is Plaatje's evocative reflection on the Land Act and its devastating impact on the everyday livelihoods of a Black majority in colonial South Africa. As First General Secretary of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC)[5] formed in 1912, Plaatje's task is not only documentation of effects of the Land Act for many dispossessed Black landowners, but also the task of convincing the British government of the inherent cruelty of such an Act and its resultant social, spiritual, psychological and political effects. In the words of John Dube, one of the chosen emissaries to England alongside Plaatje, the mission was to "bring the facts of their grievances to bear on the British government, and then lodging their protest through His Majesty's Ministers with the King, and asking the King to exercise his powers by disallowing the Act" (cited in Peterson, 2008, p. 83). In *The Site of Memory* (1995) literary scholar and novelist Toni Morrison similarly bears witness to the genre of writing found in slave narrative autobiographies, memoirs, and recollections. Morrison is interested in what she identifies as two primary objectives in these genres of writing: *1)* the personal and collective accounting of oneself and one's defined racial group; and *2)* the appeal to a readership (presumed White) of the humanity of Black people more broadly:

> Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: "This is my historical life – my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race." Two: "I write this text to persuade other people – you, the reader, who is probably not black – that we are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery." (Morrison, 1995, p. 86)

For Peterson (2008) several key functions of petition as genre emerge: first, that the petition need not only be read as a plea but, second, as a site that allows other possibilities of relation to emerge. Plaatje is thus able to produce a narrative that constructs modes of self at both personal and group levels, like the autobiographical writing that Morrison excavates. Likewise, the space to reflect on both personal and collective aspirations and ideals for living as free subjects runs through these different accounts written at different historical moments. Thus, Plaatje reflects on the spiritual, existential, and material meaning of land for Africans as the slave memoirs reflect on the freedom to be free from the shackles of ownership. For Peterson and Morrison, the imagined readership of these different writings is just as interesting, for it is here that the questions of moral imagination become evident. In the act of petitioning another, what imaginations of humanity do we construct and envision as fundamental for living? This is the first function of the petition.

5 This would later become the African National Congress (ANC).

In drawing similarities to the petition's historical antecedents – whether found in Biblical lamentations and hymns, or the petitions to local chiefs in colonial South Africa who served as intermediaries to rulers, to medieval Europe, Peterson (2008) draws attention to the historical idealization of a subject's right to appeal to Sovereign authority. In honoring the petition's structure and form as spiritual, social, and rhetorical tool Peterson further draws attention to its function beyond political strategy. This is a second function that the petition makes available to us, *the establishment of social relations between directly or indirectly opposing constituents:*

> 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. Irrespective of the outcome of the petition, the intricacies of power between the petitioner and the petitioned remains and this is evident to the former. (Peterson, 2008, p. 84)

Peterson further gestures towards a mobility of power when he observes that:

> […] the petition, in its European configuration, is a form of inherited technology with paradoxical possibilities: it is both the manifestation and testing of the colonially derived instruments of governance only now under the *relative* or *considerable* control of native supplicants who can, simultaneously, appeal and threaten to subvert the existing order should their pleas fail. (Peterson, 2008, p. 84, emphasis in original)

The relational configuration that emerges in the act of petitioning signals a third function of the petition as genre: the acknowledgement and reminder of our extant responsibilities to each another. The petition reminds the petitioned that a responsibility to another has either been weakened or is altogether non-existent. In Peterson's provocation a consideration of the human as part of the subjects' emergence, whether to another human subject or an impersonal entity such as the State, becomes evident. Put differently, it is not only an issue of persuading another of my humanity that is at stake. It is also the hope that the one who receives my petition embodies a capacity for empathy to *see* my humanity and *hear* my corresponding concerns. It is to believe in the economy of a moral imagination that can activate empathetic response to my plight. It is to think, feel, and imagine across differences[6]. Israeli writer David Grossman's (2008) evocative reflection on the continued state of war and conflict in the surrounds of his homeland is succinctly stated in his retelling of Kafka's story '*A Little Fable*': as the trap door closes on a mouse and with the cat prowling just beyond, the mouse

6 This is not to argue the unquestionable nobility of petitions (after all, it is possible to petition for unjust status quos that sustain hierarchical power inequalities to remain firmly in place).

says: “Alas, the world is growing smaller every day.” (p. 24). Grossman’s reflection on the ever-growing small world that we all live in, and whose social and political orders of difference we confront in shared and different ways, is sympathetic to the challenges of access to each other that Peterson similarly grapples with. For Grossman, this challenge of access, metaphorically symbolized as void, is one that steadily increases between us and a world in crisis. It is the connection of this void to the erasure of our moral imagination and capacity for recognition of each other’s humanity that Grossman laments. He is worth repeating at length here:

> This void does not remain empty. It quickly fills up with apathy, cynicism, and above all despair—the despair that can fuel a distorted reality for many years, sometimes generations. The despair that one will never manage to change the situation, never redeem it. And the deepest despair of all—the despair of human beings, of what the distorted situation ultimately exposes in each of us. (Grossman, 2008, p. 23)

Analogous to Grossman’s lament we may find in Ruth O’Brien’s caution in her foreword to Martha Nussbaum’s vital *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), that “a democracy filled with citizens who lack empathy will inevitably breed more types of marginalization and stigmatization, thus exacerbating rather than solving its problems” (p x). Cautioning against the increasing global disregard for the Humanities in favor of STEM[7] subjects as supposed panacea for a world-in-crisis, Nussbaum sums up her thoughtful critique thus:

> If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2)

In his reflection, Peterson is astute in his observation of empathy and care that is evident in Plaatje’s practice of petitioning others. He argues that in the witnessing of others’ despair and pain, Plaatje’s mission is not only political but spiritual in the quest for establishing a mutual bond across races and classes: “speaking to us across a century, Plaatje compels us to reflect on humankind’s disturbing ability to remain unmoved by other people’s suffering” (Peterson, 2008, p. 96). In thinking through the conundrum of witnessing and asserting that “the key to empathy lies in our admission that we are ignorant of the inner lives of others”, Mandla Langa introduces a level of complexity concerning the politics of interiority and othering (Langa, 2022: 39:02 – 39:10). Lauren Berlant (2022) similarly grapples with the relational frictions that are part of people’s

7 Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

inconvenience to us, especially as proximate others who must be dealt with in some way to subvert this inconvenience. The key term here is empathy as a connecting quality that can foster community building and care for each other. In reflecting on the ethos of Nadine Gordimer as an activist and writer, Mandla Langa (2022) pursues the vocabulary of witnessing in terms of *the absence of empathy* and *the will to build community*. He says:

> If she were to rise today, she would wonder at the incoherence of the mercy that she had fought for so relentlessly to put through, that all people matter. […] Today, she would shudder at the language of the xenophobes, some of them occupying the seats of the mighty. Formulating their call for the expulsion of all people, the darker races who come from the other side of the border. As a White South African, the irony of Black South Africans slaughtering their brethren would not be lost on her nor would she be surprised at the obscenity of the opting out of the troubled experiment called the New South Africa by white society. [54:08-55:21]

It is through writing about the plight of slavery that the black slave writers endeavor to access empathy. Morrison argues that this endeavor necessarily assumes a two-pronged face, educating the reader on the evils of slavery in America *and* reminding the reader of their inherent goodness: "They tried to summon up his [sic] finer nature in order to encourage him [sic] to employ it" (1995, p. 88). Langa makes no presumption of his audience's inherent nobility of heart and high-mindedness. But his appeal does attempt to summon up our finer natures and to employ these accordingly. The urgency of our time is different in significant ways from the colonial and Apartheid time of Plaatje and even the height of American slavery. But it is no less urgent. The gains of our important 'posts' – post-Apartheid, post-colonial eras – are important to applaud and observe but are also misleading in their seductiveness to forget. Our time resembles a comical caricature of sorts: an era of democratic freedom twenty-nine years after the demise of Apartheid, and yet a majority population that remains locked in cycles of poverty, premature death, and lack of access to resources necessary for physical and mental wellbeing. According to the *2020 World Bank Poverty Brief Report*, approximately 55.5% (30.3 million people in the country) of the population lives in poverty at the national poverty line, and 25% (13.8 million) experiences food poverty (World Bank Poverty & Equity Brief, 2020). Across the rest of the continent, debt continues to plague and impede many African countries' capacity to care for their citizenry. According to Abebe Aemro Selassie, the director of the African Department at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), "public debt ratios are at their highest level in over two decades and many low-income countries are either in, or close to, debt distress' (International Monetary Fund Newsletter, 2022). Together with Morrison, we may indeed agree that "none of this bodes well for the future" (Morrison, 2015).

And so, in the face of these and many other interlocking constraints and impediments, how are we to live with each other? How to establish relationality with each other that is invested in the good of all and builds healthy community rather than destroys or causes harm? This is the urgency of today. The petition as relational practice becomes even more fraught with anxiety and desire-laden structures of feeling that render empathy mute. Grahame Hayes (has argued that "we need to be taught love as a *social* skill, or rather taught how to love *socially"* (Hayes, 2017, p. 81, original emphasis). I would argue the same for empathy. In the shift toward other routes and strategies for freedom – across political, economic, social, and even academic contexts:

> […] we seem to be forgetting about the soul, about what it is for thought to open out of the soul and connect person to world in a rich, subtle, and complicated manner; about what it is to approach another person as a soul, rather than as a mere useful instrument or an obstacle to one's own plans; about what it is to talk as someone who has a soul to someone else whom one sees as similarly deep and complex. (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 6)

Nussbaum turns to the Humanities as a disciplinary site that offers some hope to engage the complexities of the future in its openness to reading multiple and diverse worlds. Through the practice of reading, we may nurture empathy toward different others by accessing their worlds and experiences. Jane Bennet describes this process of access as akin to "moments of border-crossing" that offers "sources of illumination" (Bennett, 2000, p. 3). Grace Musila similarly reflects on her reading biography as that of a "cultural eavesdropper" (2002, p. 82), not only reading but *translating* the world beyond:

> Cultural eavesdropping sharpened our imaginative capacities, as the material we read demanded deep stretches of imagination to connect with people, experiences and life worlds that had little in common with ours. *It instilled in us forms of empathy* that did not rely on community. When you are an eavesdropper, clarity is not guaranteed. Some of the taken-for granted interpretative codes available to primary addressees are opaque to you. You learn to improvise meanings out of these opacities. *You learn to build affective bridges to relate to unfamiliar life worlds.* (Musila, 2022, p. 86, my emphasis)

This is also why we must write. Morrison's (1995) assertion that the black slave writers recognized literacy's power to change lives resonates with Grossman's (2009) and African feminist scholar Amina Mama's (2011) injunction to write. I would argue that if literacy is power, so too is its relational dimension. We write (and read) to purge ourselves of false dichotomies of self and other, to imagine not-yet-present worlds, to nurture empathy and sense of connection to others, to cultivate a moral imagination. Narrative psychology's interest in storied lives (Squire, 2021) and the function of narration as practice that

enables us to traverse the realms of language, temporality, anxiety and also desire (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2009) cannot be overstated here. In writing, we may also undertake the responsibility Plaatje and his forbears present to us, that is to reflect on ourselves and our place in the world. Amina Mama observes:

> For those who do not fit, who must live with the constant unease of being different, writing provides a way of clawing back the heavy tarpaulins of one's subjection, […] The reflective process is this act of rebellion, carried out in and for itself, within one's own head, or in one's immediate community, however so defined. (Mama, 2000, p. 19-20)

Even as she cautions against simplistic romanticization of what it means to speak from the margins, Musila (2021) similarly takes up this notion of marginality as a critical site from which to reflect and speak back to the world. For her, the curiosity and ease with interpreting the world through a lens of multiplicity is readily available to us when we are not blinded by dominating positionalities that often favor a singular lens. We write (and read) to access the interior lives of others and ourselves. Kopano Ratele's (2005) positing that even the mundane and the ordinary that is part of interior lives, often dismissed as trivial and irrelevant, must be explored relative to their historical-political formations. Ratele explores such mundanity in the form of intimacy, postulating on the politics of intimacy in the context of racial, gendered, and classed oppression in Apartheid and Post-Apartheid South Africa. Asserting that "awareness of others and of the self always references specific bodies and places" (2005, p. 562), Ratele engages questions of interiority via political and affective registers that attend to the role of violence and power in the formation of psychic lives.

But in the absence of stories, how do we access each other? In the shaky foundation of contested and forgotten memories, how do we access the interior lives of others and even ourselves? For Morrison, "only the act of the imagination can help me" (p. 92). Molly Andrews (2014) makes an argument for the intrinsic relationship between narrative and imagination, delving into some of the complexities and tensions implicit in the endeavor to access each other. For Andrews, one key dimension of imagination is the practice of not only imagining other worlds and people but also that "we must imagine how we are imagined" (p. 10). Such a task necessitates that we can not only *cultivate* interior lives but also *reflect* on these lives. And yet if imagination and narrative open possibilities for access, they may also shut down such possibilities. In her response to Pumla Gqola's inaugural lecture as African Feminist Chair, Grace Musila makes such a case. While she lauds the subversion, transgression, creativity, and refusal of limitations that imagination may offer to us, Musila also cautions against its romanticization. Pointing to the potential for systems of power to co-opt imagination in limiting freedoms of others, Musila reminds us of the function of imagination in the service of empire and colonialism. She

draws on Chinua Achebe's critical distinction between 'healthy' and 'brutal' imaginative fictions that may either nourish or curb all manner of freedoms. In this recourse to 'wicked imaginations' contestations of humanity abound and are invariably inflected with race, class, and gendered overtones.

I conclude this section by returning to Langa's provocation to us: how to be a witness? Perhaps in Morrison's (1995) proclamation that "if writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic" (p. 92), we may yet rediscover the simple capacity for writing to build and sustain communities during times of despair and apathy. Thinking with Ratele on what it would mean for reimagined practice of "academics" taking to "the streets" (2003, p. 46) I end this section with a problematic posed by Peterson to an audience at the University of Cape Town (2018) on the erasure of community and artistic creativity in bridging the false dichotomy between science and activism. In this problematic, Peterson pushes further Langa's concern of witnessing:

> A question that I have been and I'm still thinking through, and that was: why is it that 70s to 90s, with all the repression and lack of resources, we were able to create strategic spaces and production to produce community newspapers, art etc. and most of that met its demise from round about 1990. So why does the moment of democracy lead to – I don't want to say a death – but a dearth of the kind of work we had been doing in the 70s, 80s and 90s? (Peterson, 2018, 34:01-34.46)

African Ontology, Ritual and Art: Narrating the Subject in the aftermath of Trauma and Violence

In this next section I think further with Peterson to make the case that models of healing and engaging with trauma within psychology may stand to benefit from ontology and practices of healing that perhaps find more currency outside of the discipline. In *Dignity, memory and the future under siege*, Peterson (2012) reiterates the violent matrix of colonial modernity's logics as these have configured in the South African context. These logics often incorporated intersecting and at times contradicting logics of race, class, gender and sexuality, and language. To my mind, one of the recurring motifs of trauma and violence that he puts forward is the disequilibrium between political and personal life that manifests in how ordinary people live, love, and even die. Resonating with Ratele's (2019) recent call for a psychology that attends to the psychopolitics of living and dying well, Peterson's reflections here address the psychical contingencies of material and psychological freedom in today's South Africa, and the ongoing violence and abuse of power that these seem to rest on. I identify three critical sites for apprehension that he attends to: *1)* the significance and materiality of the ordinary and the body, *2)* how to grapple with the relations between past, present and future, trauma, memory, and

healing, and *3)* the significance of exploring the everyday experiences and forms of recovery used by individuals to overcome and deal with trauma.

Reflecting on the role of African ontology and rituals and art to provide a means for healing in the aftermath of violence and trauma, he observes:

> 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)

Returning to the gesture of the petition as a form of relationality whereby a subject may narrate itself as human, invoking rights and responsibilities as part of a social contract that foregrounds humanity, the question of recognition and its politics comes to the fore. Butler's (2009) notion of recognizability is a critical one here. For Butler, while recognizability is a "universal potential" in the sense that it "belongs to all persons as persons" (p. 5), other political and social factors will determine who gets to be recognized as human. In other words, "the scope and meaning of recognisability" (p. 6) remains contested. Mbembe (2019) similarly explores this politics of recognition through his notion of necropolitics, whereby a politics of death and dying (inflected via racial, classed, and gendered registers) influences the disposability of human lives (Mbembe & Meintjies, 2003). The racial psychopolitics of the social and material body vulnerable to death and injury is equally taken up in the scholarship of Hugo Ka Canham (see Canham, 2021a; b). Peterson tackles this troubling politics via the *temporal afterlives* of trauma and memory. In exploring the excesses of the past in the present, and the nation state project to treat the past as finished, he questions the effects on a not-yet future that such an engagement with the past in the present inadvertently produces. He writes:

> The link between the past and the present is ruptured in a manner that literally suggests 'leaving the past behind'. Such evocations of the future, in effect, empty the country's history of its past and present and substitute the need to recognize and deal with the past in the present with the deification of forgiveness as the sine qua non of nationhood and progress (p. 217).

In addition to this critique of forgetfulness, Peterson further throws the proverbial spanner in the works by equating a practice and politics of forgetfulness with the enabling of a moral vacuum that erodes capacity for empathy and connection. Forgetfulness – and its tendency to produce forgetful subjects with a penchant for nurturing amoral ties to history and the present – becomes "a predisposition that is

apparent in the indifferent responses to the struggles of ordinary people to secure the means of life" (Peterson, 2012, p. 218).

In thus turning to African ontology, rituals and art, Peterson seeks to explore sites and practices of healing and connection that attest to other ways of existing in the world not mired in disconnected individualism and disavowal of connection to human, spiritual and natural worlds. He makes three important claims: *firstly*, that for the majority of African Black people, personal, spiritual, and cultural beliefs and responsibilities are part of their everyday responses to trauma and other challenges of life; *secondly*, the domains of the personal, spiritual, and cultural may be critical sites from which to challenge African Nationalist and patriarchal narratives. This is possible precisely because these domains lay emphasis on and tend to make visible the experiences and role of women and ordinary people in making life. *Thirdly*, that while majority of people experience dire distress and violence under systems of oppression and violence, they also continually find ways to negotiate their lives within these systems and, for the majority, via indigenous knowledge systems and practices.

While much of the history of Western psychology documents a general disregard of the lived experiences and the psycho-social lives of people in the different countries that it operates, scholarship on African Psychology in the Global South has drawn important attention to the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems and practices within the discipline (see Mkhize, 2004; Makhubela, 2016; Ratele, 2017a; b; c; 2019; Nwoye, 2015; 2017; Segalo & Cakata, 2017; Dlamini, 2020; Long, 2017 amongst others). While disparate in critique and orientation in terms of what constitutes African Psychology's scope and form, this scholarship has especially been insightful in its proposition that a psychology in, for and from Africa that fails to engage the worldviews and experiences of its people is inevitably doomed to irrelevance in its practice. This failure speaks to the heart of interiority and access, the questions of "how ordinary people, faced with different forms of alienation, resort to African beliefs on the intrinsic relations between self and community, the living and the dead, and the sanctity of the body whether it is alive or passed on" (Peterson, 2012, p. 222). Ratele's (2021) and Nwoye's (2022) recent books on African psychology provide critical analysis of the gaps and shortcomings of current psychology paradigms and methodological failures in addressing questions of relevance of psychology in Africa.

Grappling with the sedimented effects of trauma and violence in people's lives today requires an understanding and sensitivity to the sensibilities that take hold in the habits and content of minds and affective composition. The registers of feeling that are part of behaviors and relational aspects of our lives remain both complex and contextual. In thus calling for a contextual psychology that engages the world from a centre in which we are located (Ratele, 2019), African Psychology seeks to provoke alternate ways of

seeing that address both disciplinary, and more broadly, historical harms. In pursuit of this potential to address historical harms and centre alternate ways of grappling with the sedimentation of trauma in our lives, Peterson similarly explores such an imaginary for psychological freedom. African knowledge systems and practices hold a promise to surface more transformative practices that may be more freeing by centring intersecting aspects of life:

> Through their sharp foregrounding of the significance of the intimate, visceral, spiritual and cultural …speak, profoundly, to the foundational notions of self that inform many African cultures and that are in dissonance with the various forms of estrangement that are precipitated by whiteness and the post-apartheid state. (Peterson, 2012, pp. 222-223)

There is not much doubt that social differences make and remake us in ways that may both reinforce and challenge these differences. However, the intricate ways that differences reside not only in the structural relations at play, but also as visceral and embodied form, is critical to be mindful of. In the provocation of feeling, how one embodies social and physical space, the social and political ordering of individual and collective desires, and even in the sense of belonging, these visceral and embodied forms become evident. Everyday situational encounters that we navigate are immersed in affective economies that are part of our racial, gendered, and classed histories. The estrangement that Peterson and other African psychology scholars identify as fundamental to addressing effects of trauma and violence in our lives directly seeks to address the place of feeling in healing. The turn to other routes of healing that consider the affective feeling of connection to culture, ritualized practices and forms of art is part of the reimagination of how we may work with trauma and historical harm. Ratele's own grappling with fragmentation beyond the traditional domain of the therapy room, taking questions of interiority and freedom into the domain of culture, urban spaces, fashion, music etc. attests to some of the interesting ways that we may further push beyond the methodology of the discipline (Kiguwa, 2023a; Ratele, 2016). Both Ratele and Peterson in a sense propose a different project of access: one that takes seriously the domains of aesthetics and Black creativity as part of healing. While critical psychological scholarship has indeed called for more nuanced approaches to understanding trauma that address social and political dimensions (see Kaminer & Eagle, 2010 and Straker, 2013 for an overview), African feminists have more explicitly challenged orthodox Western psychology models for understanding trauma and emotional wellbeing in African contexts (see Chigudu, 2016; Horn, 2020). Lastly, in addition to emphasizing the politics of language as part of trauma interventions (see Dlamini, 2020; Malherbe & Ratele, 2022; Segalo, 2014; 2022), much of this scholarship has advocated for the importance of acknowledging the melancholic formations that are part of trauma and violence through ritual (Peterson, 2012; 2021). In the next and

last section, I extend the notion of moral imagination in dialogue with Peterson's reflections on personhood through Ubuntu.

Recovering the Moral Template of Ubuntu

Eddie Ombagi (2020) invites a momentary pause amid crises at the height of the COVID pandemic. A pause that asks us *not* to dwell on our losses or fears, but rather to *remember* our desires for connection. In his evocative reflection on fragmentation as a site from which to see our lives always in motion, reaching for connection and belonging, the desire to be seen and cared for, Ombagi engages what it means to live on the margins, sensitively exploring the vulnerabilities of a world in motion, a world paralyzed, and a world shrouded in anxiety. At the heart of his provocative piece is the question of what it means to lead others and to live with others via an epistemic ethics of care:

> I am fragmented, they are fragmented, and we are fragmented.
>
> We lend ourselves to fragmentation, and we are forced into fragmentation.
>
> Our bodies are fragmentable, our daily lives fragmental. […]
>
> Pole is a Swahili word that denotes care. When uttered, it ties ourselves to others, even when we are untied ourselves. But as we attempt to mend what is broken in others, we reveal our own cracks. And in finding others through care, we find newer ways to find ourselves.
>
> We find ourselves through acknowledging our own fragmentation. We find newer ways to breathe when we "exhale" and "sigh" at the point of our failure. We find ourselves when, untangled, we reach out to others through care. We are done and undone when we say "*pole!*".
>
> We are undone – we have been made undone – we are undoing ourselves.
>
> We are fragmented – we have been fragmented – we are fragmenting ourselves
>
> (Ombagi, 2020)[8].

How may we think and work across differences toward some kind of freedom? How may care practice centre in our everyday actions and relations with each other? What shifts in our understanding of *Ubuntu* inform our expressions and practices of community? How do we confront violence and trauma in our lives today and their

8 Dr Eddie Ombagi passed away on 20th April 2023. He was a scholar of gender, queer and urban studies in Africa.

impact on community building? There has been a robust debate and conversation on the epistemology and practice of *Ubuntu* (Enslin, & Horsthemke, 2004; Letseka, 2012; Chigumadzi, 2021; 2023; Ogude et al, 2019, provide a critical overview). Peterson's (2019a) own contemplation acknowledges this robust terrain. He says:

> Ubuntu, arguably, represents one of the most salient and resonant indigenous moral concepts that African artists and intellectuals have wrestled with in attempts to think through the complexities of personhood, particularly in the aftermath of colonialism. *It is probably also one of the most used and abused terms in South Africa's public and political lexicon.* (p. 73, my emphasis)

Chigumadzi (2023) similarly decries the abuse of Ubuntu, especially its co-optation into what she describes as anthropocentric frames that separates human from ecological and ancestral worlds. She argues that "the rejection of "African humanism" as the "equivalent" of Ubuntu is informed by Black Study's long-standing critique of the Euro-American modernity's parasitic relationship to the enslaved black, as well as African philosophy's emergent critique of the humanistic interpretation of African moral traditions which falsely imports an anthropocentrism that erases the holistic metaphysics that hold abantu are formed of and *with* our ecological and ancestral worlds" (original emphasis). Likewise, Peterson suggests that Ubuntu "extends beyond interpersonal interactions into a range of related relations between humans and nature that are fundamental in Nguni cosmology" (Peterson, 2019, p. 74). However, Peterson's primary concern is neither with the origin or varied meanings of the concept but rather the work to which the concept has been put across different epochs and contexts. In so doing, he urges critical consideration of how the concept of Ubuntu may surface in the social organization of relations and even our understanding of personhood. Such a critical endeavor helps to clarify its limits and possibilities.

Peterson's second concern is to consider "the ethical and hermeneutic challenges that the notion of Ubuntu presents" (p. 74). In Langa's call for a vocabulary of witnessing that *sees* the other as human, Ubuntu's moral template is affirmed. Part of the task of harnessing moral imagination is that we remember this moral template is not a given but must be nurtured as part of community building:

> What is crucial in the postulation of Ubuntu is the emphasis on the notion that personhood, identity, and morality are not innate but are achieved in relation to and through social interaction based on ethical conduct with others, especially in conditions that are marked by imbalances in social and personal power. (Peterson, p. 75)

The erosion of community within violent systems that reinforce these imbalances of power are central to the observations that Sol Plaatje reflects on in his petition and his

text. Plaatje not only laments the loss of land necessary to making a living but also the meaning of such loss to spiritual wellbeing. Chabani Manganyi (2019) similarly suggests community fragmentation as an important site of psycho-existential neurosis. The loss of community processes in the nurturing of spiritual and psychological wellbeing is an important element in these scholars' emphasis on the role of the relational. Connecting to the moral element and in contrast to Kelley's (2002) confidence that love, and connection are inevitably at the heart of social movements for change, Peterson and others such as Kresse (2007) and Bradbury (2020) are attentive to Ubuntu's fragility in the ceaseless contexts of violent systems that contribute to the fragmentation of communities and self. It is critical then that part of the task of witnessing is to remain attentive to these fragmentations – their formations, intersections, and influence for cultivating moral imagination.

In thus extending Ubuntu to considerations of moral imagination, Peterson draws attention to common charges of deindividuation implied in the concept observing that "it is not surprising that the relationship between self and group in Ubuntu has led to […] misreadings of Ubuntu and charges of communalism in it" (p. 87). Similarly, Chigumadzi's description extends this moral template and clarification of personal and collective identity in her argument that "Ubuntu's dynamic conception of umuntu, is of a social being who is always becoming through their community of people, abantu", and speaks to the heart of what it means to be in community and to navigate life and death events as a collective (also see Mkhize, 2004). In the early 90s Western Black literary critics such as Ducille (1996) bemoaned the loss of community in social justice circles for healing racial and gender injustices. Peterson's 2018 public address not only flags a similar loss in post-Apartheid South Africa but also the significant decrease in creative and other strategies and resources for community building. Community psychologist Nick Malherbe's envisioning of a psychopolitical and contextually-bound notion of love similarly thinks with love and community to "not only encompass care, nonprejudice, concern, or affection" but also sees this love ethic as embodying capacity to "harness[…] a range of affects and actions in seeing to the needs of others and the self (Malherbe, 2021, p. 1). This moral imagination that considers relationality in terms of care is also evident in Eagleton's (2003) elucidation of love as "openness to the needs of others (p. 131). It is similarly evident in Keguro Macharia's evocative reflection on care and community even during periods of anxiety, despair, and loss:

> Pole[9], a simple, two-syllable word that says "my heart is with you." Pole, a simple, two-syllable word that says, "I am holding you, and you are held." Pole, a simple, two-syllable word that can be said, a word uttered as a sigh that conveys how difficult it is to form words in the face of the unbearable. […]

9 'Pole' is a Swahili word meaning 'Sorry'. It is offered in moments of commiseration to lend comfort. Macharia reflects on the word's possible different variations and tone in his essay.

> Pole knits. It assembles those who may not have spoken or seen each other for decades. It creates new connections, turning strangers into caregivers. It says that care exists, even and especially when the phone no longer rings, when the laugh no longer sounds, when the chair remains unoccupied. (Macharia, 2018)

Returning to the motif of a moral imagination economy that is not guaranteed but must be taught and nurtured, Peterson asserts that "one of Ubuntu's key litmus tests, then and now, is the status and treatment of women" (2019a, p. 89). He adds that the nurture of moral imagination must simultaneously be in tandem with political imaginaries of a society while ever attentive to the, at times, contradictory and perhaps self-serving sociopolitical projects that Ubuntu may be put to. It is also to consider everyday conditions of precarity and suffering. These challenges, while they may test the limits of kinship, should not determine the direction of ethical conduct toward others (Peterson, 2019a). In a different vein, Njabulo Ndebele's contention that "right now to be in South Africa is it to take up the historical imperative to become" (2013, p. xii) speaks not only to the need to continually interrogate how social categories of identity may organize our lives but to also consider what it means to become *in relation to others*. Chigumadzi elaborates thus:

> This is why abantu say, "ningenze umuntu ebantwini," *you* [second person plural] *have made a person among people*. Ubuntu, therefore, holds that in constantly *becoming*" umuntu ebantwini," *a person among people*, one must continually uphold the personhood of others. Failure to uphold the personhood of another results in social death, so that we might declare awuyena muntu, *you are not a person.* (Chigumadzi, 2023)

Peterson (2019b) similarly notes that the highest form of praise that one may offer another is to recognize their capacity for demonstrating humaneness as opposed to a disavowal of humaneness. Kresse (2017) thus argues that such a capacity, i.e. to be human, is not a given but must be proven through "concrete performance" (p. 142). Thinking with Kresse, Peterson goes on to argue that striving for an ideal world that honours Ubuntu and love as fundamental to the social and political imaginary, is an ideal that can only be bridged through moral imagination. The imaginative act that creative, artistic, and ritualistic routes to healing provide have similarly been identified by Morrison (1995), Msimang (2021; 2022). For Sisonke Msimang the project of becoming may also mean letting go of imagined notions of self that inevitably obscure this complexity. In her 2022 Keynote address to PSYSSA[10] Msimang reflects that:

> We have both been betrayed in objective terms […] but we have also in many ways betrayed ourselves. Because for the longest time, South Africans have

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> bought into the singular story. We have told ourselves that we are exceptional. That we are not like the rest of the African continent to which we belong. The crises we now face can only be addressed if we begin by accepting that at the fundament, we are no better than our neighbors. Our problems derive from the same processes and structures of colonization as their problems. And so, the solutions will come from the same places and if we accept this truth, we might begin to build a new set of stories. (Msimang, 2022, 08:41-09:44)

Concluding Thoughts

In Peterson's roles as literary, non-literary, academic scholar, community activist, filmmaker one may see the many imaginations that he offers to us. In attending to the myriad uses of narrative to imagine past, present, and future worlds, he provides a vocabulary of witnessing that insists we can do more to interpret our lives and our times. His convergence with much of Narrative and African psychology scholarship further enriches current theorizing and practice in the discipline, with a view to enhancing intergenerational dialogues on the complex dimensions of subjectivity and psychological freedom, thinking with creativity and art for healing and trauma, taking seriously what it would mean to practice psychologies *in, from* and *for* Africa. In the end, Bheki's injunction to those of us who have loved him, learned from him, and quested with him and to those yet to read him, is the responsibility to narrate our lives and our times, ever attentive to the moral template of personhood that is both our birthright and duty. Because it is true that: "The pursuit of the everyday necessities of life – whether in intimate or material relations and spheres – suggests an extraordinary will to live and love even in the most dire circumstances" (Peterson, 2016, p. 1).

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