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Walking with Bhekizizwe Peterson: The shadows and afterlives of exile

Abstract

Zwelidumile "Dumile" Feni's affecting journey unfolds as he flees South Africa in 1968, seeking political exile in England until 1978, and subsequently relocating to the United States, where he painted and sculpted until his passing in 1991. The spectral echoes of his life find resonance in his daughter's narrative within Ramadan Suleman and Bhekizizwe Peterson's film 'Zwelidumile'. This article argues that we must situate this documentary in context by examining the emotional toll and narrative accounts of the longer history of displacement brought about by colonialism and apartheid. The analysis begins by listening to the haunting signs within the documentary, revealing three moving themes. The first theme peels back the layers of secrecy, spotlighting the revelation of Marriam's biological father – drawing attention to the spectral and melancholic imbrication. The narrative then explores Feni's life in exile, examining his deliberate silence on familial matters in South Africa. The last of the three themes looks into Marriam's acknowledged but bewildering loss, exploring its implications for a sense of self and continuity. Zwelidumile exemplifies Bhekizizwe Peterson's steadfast commitment to shedding light on the complex nuances of the black experience and emphasising narrative's vital role as an essential component of what makes us human.

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Introduction

My realisation that ghosts haunt our lives is starting to take hold. Those known or unknown events, things, or people who through death or absence are an ethereal and active presence that belongs to the present and the future as much as to the past. The realisation was not always there for me. There is a retrospective dimension

to the spectral. The aftermath reveals its significance in our lives. I know I am not alone in the consciousness or feeling of being haunted by ghostlike shadows, or as Khanna (2003, p. 235) puts it, in being fixated by "the question of what or how to identify ghosts, that is, to demarcate the spectral." To listen to its truth and to lay it to rest. Bhekizizwe Peterson's body of work is an immensely useful starting point and eventual building block for someone with a nascent interest in lesser-known authors in the canon of African writers (Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023). His life's work was to "restore African writers to their rightful place as meaningful custodians and interpreters of the African experience", so revealing the reality of our colonial and apartheid ghosts (Bradbury, Mkhize & Xaba, 2022, p. xix).

The world turns around ghosts. The echoes of colonialism and apartheid continue to haunt us. Their afterlives. The postcolonial and post-apartheid. The prefix 'post' is supposedly a gesture to political and social transformation. We know this is not quite true. Discourses of racialised hierarchies of human value and white supremacy persist (Gilroy, 2002; Bhabha, 2004; Bhambra, 2016). We continue to witness the protracted and never-ending Palestinian fight for their right to self-determination (Hamdi, 2011; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2016). If Ramadan Suleman and Bhekizizwe Peterson's documentary, *Zwelidumile*, contributes to the unfolding and complex post-apartheid narrative, it places the spectral at the centre of it. The story of Marriam Diale and her father Zwelidumile "Dumile" Feni represents the unassimilable stories of mourning and melancholy between the exiled and those they left behind in the wake of the anti-apartheid struggle.

There is a spectral quality about Marriam Diale's quest to know her father, who was in exile, when it is interpreted as a sorrowful endeavour driven by a strong yearning for a relationship that was unrealised in their physical lives. It centres on the interaction between the social and psychical realms marked by a melancholic sense of missed chances for a relationship between a father and daughter that were vaporised by the father's forced absence due to apartheid. The shadow of multigenerational oppression and its psychosocial tragedies envelopes the narrative of this searching by Marriam accompanied by her mother. Through Peterson's (2019) conceptualisation of spectrality, we may even speculate that it is a shadow that she received from her mother's own sense of loss following Feni's flight into exile, and, in a broader sense, that it serves as a metaphor for the collective losses contained in an apartheid archive that will linger in post-apartheid South Africa. When Feni 'skipped the country', as it was commonly referred to before the 1990s as perhaps a way of concealing from the security authorities that someone left for exile, her mother was pregnant with her. Apart from seeing her in photographs, Feni and Marriam never did meet in person.

The quest for her is a deeply layered personal and yet very social sojourning through a retrieval of an erased family history, identity, and memory. Seeing the documentary,

I cannot help but think that she is looking for something that her father's absence has taken away from her. Something that is unidentified, unassimilable, and irretrievable. The documentary portrays her with a sorrowful expression, which betrays her longing. It is likely the result of her realisation that she will never get to know and bond with her father, nor will she ever see him alive. She will always know her father and who he was through the gaps and inconsistencies in the stories told by those who knew him. It is a story about a secret that refuses to be buried. The irony is that he was a very well-known public person. Feni's artwork gained popularity due to the upsurge in interest in black artists in the 1960s, and he was especially well-connected within a group of left-leaning black and white intellectuals (Dube, 2010; Nettleton, 2011). Taking this into consideration, to paraphrase Peterson (2019), we might look into the ways in which narratives might be employed to account for the variety of experiences of colonialism and apartheid and create avenues for intergenerational conversation.

'What's in a name?' A fair amount. The name Zwelidumile is defined at the beginning of the documentary. In IsiZulu, *Zwe* is country or land, and *Dumile* is famed, renowned or notorious. The name has an air of uncanniness. I wonder if Professor Peterson saw the Land Act function as a ghost in this story of exile and a daughter's longing for her father, much as I do. Was he thinking of the long-term effects of the horrific uprooting caused by "this wretched Land Act", as Plaatje (2007, p.77) sought to capture the feeling to describe it? Feni faced nothing but extreme hardship and poverty during his many years in exile. He could not return home owing to the political ban on liberation political parties and exiles, only to lose his life the moment this ban was lifted. Ghosts belong not only to the past. They cast a shadow over the present and future. As if the Land Act had not resulted in immense suffering and adversity for many black South Africans, the country's external exiles from apartheid serve as a haunting reminder of the 'internal exiles' or 'roving pariahs' of this Act, as Plaatje (2007) so poignantly chronicled their plight and struggles to resettle in *Native Life in South Africa*. Colonial imperialism and apartheid are closely linked to the act of being forcibly displaced from land or country.

Feni fled South Africa in 1968 to live in political exile in England, where he stayed until 1978, both according to the documentary and Dube (2010). He relocated to the US, living in Los Angeles from 1978 to 1980 and New York from 1980 until his passing in 1991. He painted and sculpted. The ghostly protagonist memorialised through his own daughter's story in Suleman and Peterson's *Zwelidumile*. In listening to the signs that haunt this documentary, three themes that come out of it will be the focus of my discussion. The first of the three looks at the identity of Marriam's biological father being revealed. I look at how the unravelling of secrecy serves as the focal point of the spectral and melancholic imbrication. I then move into her father's life in exile, paying close attention to his silence about his family situation in South Africa as a means of self-preservation and as a critical consciousness regarding loss. The last of the three themes engages

Marriam's acknowledged but indefinable loss and its implications for sense of self and continuity. Marriam's conflicted emotions paint a nuanced picture of a daughter trying to come to terms with her father's formerly indefinite but now permanent absence. *Zwelidumile* exemplifies Bhekizizwe Peterson's steadfast commitment to shedding light on the complex nuances of the black experience and emphasising narrative's vital role as an essential component of what makes us human.

Join me as we journey through this deeply touching narrative of exile and its knock-on effects, with Ramadan Suleman and Bhekizizwe Peterson behind the camera and Marriam in front of the screen as the main character among a host of characters, including the penumbral presence of her father, Feni. The journey's signposts correspond to the documentary's scene sequence. We will analyse and theorise our experiences and observations while traveling using Peterson's (2002, 2008, 2015, 2019) corpus of written work as well as other scholarly works guiding our path.

Open secrets

I relate to some aspects of Marriam's story. My father also left for exile before I was born. He was wanted by security forces like many student activists after the 1976 student riots. Like Marriam's father, Feni, he ended up in the US. He was awarded a United Nations bursary for university study after fleeing to Botswana. On a visit to him in Botswana, my mother fell pregnant with me. Marriam's mother was pregnant with her when Feni left South Africa. My mother told me about my father when I was between the age of six to eight years old. I do not think until then I gave much thought to who my father is growing up in a home with many cousins under our grandparents' care with our own parents away because of work. I do not know why then it came as a surprise. It was perhaps the politically volatile environment of my surroundings which gave the revelation its affective valence of shock combined with bewilderment. I was already familiar at that age with the struggle waged for political freedom related to the daily assaults I witnessed meted out by South Africa's security and military forces of the apartheid regime in the township communities where I grew up. This maybe made it a secret, both from the viewpoints of the general social context of my upbringing and within the intimate space of my family environment. I share this personal anecdote to think about the rabbit hole that appeared for Marriam upon her finding out her father was in exile. It did for me, too, not long after I found out about my father's identity.

Everything seemed to have changed, leaving Marriam with a sense of unease and doubt instead of a firm foundation of knowledge about her father. The difficulty lay in defining the parameters of this departure that made it what Cheng (2000) calls an 'absent presence'. Upon examining Marriam's plummet into uncertainty via the lens of the catastrophe brought about by colonialism and apartheid, it becomes evident how "narrative plays a role in the cultural and psychological transmission of a number

of recurring tropes across generations", such as those related to loss, heritage, and belonging (Peterson, 2019, p. 346). I say this because her finding out about her father constitutes the beginning of her narrative and the need for us to realise that, although it is her story, it is one that is not uncommon or unrelated to the larger narrative about the unfolding consequences of South Africa's history. She was asked by the documentary's interviewer if either her mother or grandmother ever spoke to her about her father:

> … you know, I found out from one of the family members. I think I was younger than 11 years-old, that my father had actually…because there was a whole lot of awareness that people were leaving the country. There was this underground fight going on between the Boers and the Africans, and my dad had run away from the country. One of my mom's relatives actually said to me, you know, this man your mom is getting married to, he is not your dad. Your father ran off, and I was always curious, I always wanted to find out who was my dad. And in my mind, you know, I mean as a child you don't think if somebody says somebody's ran off and he's gone away, you know, I thought he's gone to the next town (*laughter*). Or he's somewhere in South Africa (*laughter*), he's ran off. So, I'd always be curious if I saw somebody, I thought that maybe this person looks like me (*laughter*). You know, so… (*sadness, she looks down*)… as a child you want to have someone that you identify with, like your mom or dad, something I never had, I mean I didn't look like my mom, and I've never seen my dad and I did not know where I belonged. (Marriam Diale, in Suleman & Peterson, 2010)

It is perhaps expected for a child that age to want to know where they belong. I recall that it was for me, too. It is also not surprising that she had no concept that the world is bigger than she thinks it is at a time when it would have seemed smaller than it does now with the availability of the internet and social media. In her opening narration, Marriam shares a critical realisation that emerges during the documentary: the void created by her father's absence and how hard it is for her to cover it up or mask it. It seems that affective is the correct term to describe this void, or more accurately, the revelatory moment that preceded it. The void the discovery opened, as Massumi (2015) would say, prepared her for an uncertain shift between the linear succession of a before and an after. Let us call it a provocative affective-moment. It was also eventful as it perhaps played out against the backdrop of the instability of the political climate in the townships throughout the country. The political turbulence often transpired in ways that challenged the division between the individual and the community. There was no cut-and-dry distinction between them. Based on Dube's (2010) research on Feni, my guess is she found about her father's identity during the early and mid-1980s, during the height of the frequently extremely violent and coordinated state suppression of anti-apartheid resistance. Inarguably, "there was a lot of awareness that people are leaving the country", and yet there was also a shroud of secrecy surrounding exiles. The alternative very frequently

led to torture, death, or both at the hands of state security agencies for those suspected of insurgence, which included those who were leaving the country for military training elsewhere for the armed struggle against the apartheid regime.

The same agencies also often harassed other family members or relatives. The apartheid police frequently harassed my paternal grandmother and aunt, believing them to be either covering up for my father or trying to coerce them into telling the truth about his whereabouts. In the political liberation struggle, there was also political violence linked to accusations against some activists for being police informants, which frequently resulted in their deaths because of retaliation in their communities or by the liberation movements (Hassim, 2022, Dlamini, 2015; Callinicos, 2012). Hassim (2022, p. 110) says "the target" of this "physical violence was not the illegitimate state (or even white people)", but mostly "young black men…these men were seen as agents of or collaborators with the state." Complex moments can lead to a variety of action paths and secrecy was a strategic option. Actually, that is how it had to be. Horn (2011, p. 103) drives the point home: "secrecy opens up a discretionary space of action exempt from the rule of law." During apartheid, the small window of discretion was between life and death. As Dlamini (2015, p. 8) notes, "apartheid generated an 'unwanted intimacy' between people that built an insidious complicity into daily life." In any case, what occurred issued from the "Manichean reading of the moment – black resistance against white supremacy – and helped to create a shared subjectivity among black people, with many who were "attracted to the notion that the moment had arrived for a renewed violent struggle conducted from within the townships…" (Hassim, 2022, p. 111).

We could examine this environment of secrecy not only as shared across community or society levels but also at the family level. I am interested in thinking through this idea by Marriam that she wondered when she sees someone who looks like her if he was her father. There is a lesson about a melancholic link to spectrality. It was a thought that, as she admitted it to herself, was compounded by her inability at the age of eleven to grasp that 'running away' was not to another part of the country. In this highly politically charged context, running away meant leaving the country. Her father's absence haunted her. She yearned for him to appear rather than remain merely a concept. Inaugurated by the rather clandestine yet transformational experience of knowing his identity, she felt the alchemy of a leaning-towards him as if it were a magnetic pull. It is as if her need to know or see him overcame her before she could fully register the intensity of her longing, both mentally and emotionally. Her life seemed to start anew when she realised her father was not who she had believed him to be. The discovery triggered a tendency in her to want to be in a relationship with her father. "Tendency is a passionate orientation governing movement toward an attractor or desired terminus" (Massumi, 2015, p. 98). The documentary reveals how her life experiences will shape her feelings about being his daughter over time.

In a climate of political and social secrecy and extreme caution, stories about people who fled apartheid South Africa for exile proliferated. One can speculate about the reasons behind why it was one of her other family members rather than her mother or grandmother who revealed her father's identity. The reasons may or may not have been related to the general atmosphere of secrecy prevailing at the societal level at the time as discussed before. Family secrets, especially about lineage, can unsettle and imperil relationships once revealed, reshaping their fabric (Smart, 2011). The important point to make is that secrecy at this level of interpersonal family dynamics could only have intensified the mystery surrounding her father's identity for her. If Marriam was divided between her biological father, who was not present, and the present father who was set to wed her mother, then there was more to the intrigue about her father's identity. It is possible to see the two father figures – one present and the other absent – as representing the contrast between her increasing awareness of the magnitude of the defiance against oppression, symbolised by her biological father's absence in her life, and the tenuous accommodation of the repressive status quo that the present father represented. It seems convincing. This is all speculative, however, as she never talked about 'the man' her mother is marrying throughout the documentary. Perhaps it was less so than it appears.

We know it is true that Marriam's father fled, or there is 'flesh' to the revelation of his disappearance or absence. The flesh is crucial to the functioning of a spectre, so says Derrida (1994, pp. 4-5):

> As soon as one no longer distinguishes spirit from specter, the former assumes a body, it incarnates itself, as spirit, in the specter. Or, rather… the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the… return of the specter. There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reapparition of the departed.

Marriam's longing to see her real father take on human form is sparked by the revelation. Shrouded as it might have been in the political intrigue of the time, and with communication with those who had already left or were leaving South Africa for political exile cut off due to the possibility that their whereabouts would be discovered by the authorities, endangering their lives and causing harm to those they left behind, her knowledge of who her father is was affective in this way. In Massumi's (2002, p. 35) sense of the term, affect is implicated by virtue of the "simultaneous participation of the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual, as one arises from and returns to the other." Her father's ghostly absence is a sensation, or if you will, something spiritual, that she carried with her.

The affect was initially potentialised in the projection of her father's likeness onto other bodies that, in contrast to his body, were near her. Every relationship, real or imaginary, leaves an imprint on us, as Derrida (2001, 2004) points out elsewhere. This trace not only forms the foundation of our relationships with others, including with ourselves in relation to them, but also serves as the ground for our grieving over their absence, departure, or even death. Melancholy or grief in this sense is perpetual and always has a spectral element to it through its connection to the remnants of others and our own on them. Even before she was born, Marriam's relationship with her father was already forged in the trail of *absentia*, or his indefinite departure, since it was uncertain when or if he and the other exiles would return. This, together with the effects of his physical passing later, brings to light the mutually inclusive association of spectrality and melancholy. As the documentary progresses, we must recognise their importance to the unfolding of Marriam's life narrative, which can best be understood considering the larger affective narrative and spectres of apartheid and the opposition to it.

Melancholy in the space between introjection and incorporation

Marriam travelled to New York with her mother to speak to people who knew her father and to get acquainted with his life in exile. Interviews with Feni's friends, acquaintances, and relatives create the remainder of the narrative of Feni's life. The documentary also includes a few clips from previously recorded and filmed conversations with Feni, as well as his original artwork and a voice recording of his musical performance of the well-known yet eerie song *Amagugu*. The song summons the pangs of his loneliness, resonating with the sorrowful alienation from the homeland of his birth – a recurring theme within the heartfelt interviews of the documentary. It is to two of the interviews that I now turn. One of them is by the interviewer with one of his friends, Moji Mokone, who is also an artist that Feni had been friends with both in South Africa and when they were together in exile in England. The other interview is with another South African friend, the academic Dr Cyril Khanyile, who Feni lived with for a brief period in the US. Feni's decision to remain silent about family matters back in South Africa is the main subject of both interviews. Between the interviews, Feni speaks for himself on the isolating grip of exile. This choice was marked by an intense ambivalence considering how it ultimately found expression in his artwork.

We witness in the documentary that leaving your home country to live in exile is 'incorporated' rather than 'introjected' as a loss. In contrast to incorporation, which entails recognising a loss and fostering a clearer understanding of it but without fully internalising it into one's identity, introjection involves unconsciously repressing feelings of loss and assimilating them without fully acknowledging the loss itself (Abraham & Torok, 1994). When a loss is incorporated rather than introjected, it suggests suppression rather than repression, existing as a seldom-acknowledged recollection that occasionally resurfaces in thought. It is like investing in mitigating these losses. It manifests itself

when you realise that other exiles are not talking about themselves, which discourages you from talking about yourself. The recollections of home keep returning, despite the silence or even the secrecy surrounding it. You may even come across individuals from your country or even search for reminders of home in objects you can touch or smell in this nostalgic type of sensory processing. Everything about it points to a constant sense of ongoing unease about being in exile.

> Nobody ever asked me where my mother is, where my brother is, not interested in that, right, this is your new family… what I'm trying to say is that when you are in exile, a part of you dies you know, things that you don't want to remember or that might, there is something that really makes you forget and you are reminded by South Africa when somebody comes in to visits from South Africa even though you are suspicious that they might be working for "Boss". But the fact that they look like you, you are keen to find out from them or even hear how they speak, or even smell, yeah because after some time, you smell like people from England, and you miss that kind of a smell of a South African. When I first came here, I would go into a taxi and make sure that I go sit in the back and ensconce in between that fattest woman at the back. (*smiles*) Sweet, everything. (Moji Mokone, in Suleman & Peterson, 2010)

There was an interplay of silence, secrets, and ignorance during exile. It shaped not only the lack of spoken truths, but also deliberate restraint in sharing personal information and a skilful avoidance of personal matters (Manganyi, 1996; Dlamini, 2015; Becker et al., 2023). To be exiled from South Africa due to the political exigencies of living in an oppressive apartheid society meant that a part of you perished or was cut-off. It required actively 'remembering to forget', in the words of Khanna (2003). Forgetting nevertheless was always haunted by remembering. Forgetting and remembering made uneasy bedfellows in exile. There were always tangible and intangible reminders of home and everyone you left behind. This tension, or dialectical relationship, between forgetting and remembering appeared to have structured emerging families and communities of South African exiles. To be oneself was to remember to forget, to conceal, or to erase oneself and personal history. Personal subjectivity was subsumed into a political subjectivity in the context of the anti-apartheid struggle in exile. Secrecy again here pulled the strings in determining what or how much anyone knew about you, and you knew about others while in exile. We know from Feni's friend, Mokone, in the extract above that the possibility of being found out heightened the suspicion of encountering visitors from South Africa. I think it is also reasonable to imagine that this doubt about who to trust or not circulated within South African exile communities themselves constituted based upon an implicit agreement of keeping quiet about oneself and familial background.

Feni threw himself into his artwork both creatively and from an anti-apartheid political standpoint. He was a prolific sculptor and painter. As Dube (2010) noted of his artistic output, it was already notably visible before he left South Africa, garnering a lot of media coverage. He continued to be productive while living abroad, and his work followed the path of social commentary, which made leaving his country the only practical choice for pursuing the kind of free artistic expression that the racist apartheid government forbade. "I didn't leave South Africa; I was forced out of South Africa", he pointed out in an old interview featured in the documentary. His departure from South Africa was a decisive move that affected him greatly. It was to be characterised, as his observations in the excerpt below suggest, by loss and the foreclosure of recollections of home and family in the context of being exiled with no realistic prospect of returning home:

> I have been in exile now for over 20 years… my wife was six months pregnant when I was forced out of South Africa… I try hard to not think about it because you know, it does affect, even when you don't have a family, it's even worse for someone who has a family, and you know the reasons why you can't sleep…

The silence, secrecy or ignorance entailed its own code: the exiled rarely ever spoke about their personal lives back home in South Africa. It was like an unwritten rule and a strategy of self-preservation to ward off the emotional heartache of thinking of those you might never see again. It was, thus, a sort of phantom-like-alternate reality that no one really acknowledged but that everyone knew existed. In his psychoanalytic biography of Gerard Sekoto, *A Black Man Called Sekoto*, Manganyi (1996, p. 174) reflects on this:

> It would be naive to believe that the full story of this remarkable South African has been told in these pages…Many questions about his life and work still need to be answered. When one recalls the vehemence of his refusal to come to South Africa or to discuss 'family secrets', one indeed wonders what secrets he took to his grave. Maybe, just maybe, Sekoto did have a child with someone after all![1].

In contrast to Manganyi's (1996) enigmatic portrayal of Sekoto, I think that these secrets of losses are not entirely 'suppressed' or 'sublimated'. If, as Kuhn (2002, p. 2) suggests, secrecy is "a necessary condition of the stories we are prompted by memory to tell about our lives", then it signifies a critical understanding of exile's costs and the political reasons behind it, which serves as an additional impetus for upending them. It appears that in order to cope with their losses, silence or secrecy acted as a self-preservation or self-protective strategy and a type of 'critical observing agency', as described by Freud (1934), suggesting that the decision to remain silent or secretive was a conscious one. Instead of trying to equate this critical awareness with resignation or repression, I would

1 Gerard Sekoto was an artist prior to Feni who fled South Africa for exile in France during the 1940s.

like to see it as a sign that there is some awareness of the gravity of the losses and their consequences, especially the fact that they cannot be made right if there is no chance of going back to South Africa. The secretive culture or culture of silence of South African political exiles with regard to family matters takes on particular remarkable relevance when we consider Marriam's seemingly covert discovery of her father, Feni, through a family member. It is hard to claim that this predisposition toward silence or secrecy crossed the physical boundaries separating political exiles from their families, but even so, it appears very important.

I wonder how Marriam made sense of all of this when she met, or watched clips of the interviews, with some of the people who knew her father. While it seems that Feni did begin to reach out to Marriam and her mother based on the letter that Khanyile wrote to Marriam in 1987 (*www.dumilefeni.co.za/archives.html*), Marriam's conversations in the documentary with those who knew her father gave the impression that he did not talk much about her or her mother. I imagine that for Marriam and her mother everyone's recollections of her father helped to paint a picture for them of his life – not only of his endearing personality and his friends' admiration and love for him, but also of the difficult life he lived, particularly in the last years of his life in New York. He moved frequently while he was living in New York. He was at one stage homeless and sleeping on subways. He was sickly with diabetes, and often, penniless and reliant on the generosity of friends and acquaintances.

At the same time, it was also apparent that Marriam was haunted by a gnawing question or vague sense of whether her father thought of her and her mother – if he ever spoke about them. In the documentary, Marriam and her mother's conversation with Khanyile encapsulates this recurrent coming-together of the anguish of being in exile, severing ties with family members, and coming to terms with the possibility that you may never see them again:

> … and sometimes people could not communicate with the family, because the family could then become victimised by the apartheid regime…I remember my cousin, who is very close to me, I had to stop writing to him because the special branch was intercepting the letters and started visiting him. So, there is pressure that you would cut-off communication with members of your family for their own safety but also for your own sake because it is the pain of separation with no visible hope of ever getting in touch with them. (Cyril Khanyile, in Suleman & Peterson, 2010)

In the phrase "the pain of separation", equal emphasis should be retained on the words "pain" and "separation". Feni left South Africa out of a principled stance for unfettered artistic freedom in opposition to segregation and racial supremacy, barely able to read

and write. There was no promise of an education, employment, or anything else for that matter. Only hardship, and as we have seen already, agony. It also became dangerous to leave South Africa for oneself or for those you were close to, including family. Reason is "liable to conversion into emotion" (Massumi, 2015, p. 101); hence, the reason for leaving or 'separation' of exile evolved into 'pain', and the severing of familial ties resulted from the 'pain'. 'Separation' and 'pain' are processually embracing. Indeed, according to Ahmed (2004, p.24), it is through "the intensification of pain sensations that bodies and worlds materialise and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, surface and fixity is produced". This process unveils the interconnectedness forged among some exiles, and with those they met in the countries where they sought refuge who rallied behind the anti-apartheid struggle, akin to the emergence of a "new family" as alluded to previously by Mokone.

I think Feni thought a lot about home and family, including his daughter and wife. His artwork and the previously cited extract above by him are evidence of this. The spectre of his unknown daughter and wife was a shadow that followed him both in life and in his work. In addition to the overtly political messages found in a number of his paintings and sculptures, such as his exploration of themes related to 'the insanity of reason' in modern history and its role in enabling human oppression of one another (Khan, 2016), as seen in his painting 'African Guernica' or sculpture 'History', a sizable portion of his body of work centres on family and relationships.

He reworked, for example, his most likely earlier and undated painting *Mother and Child* in a later iterative canvass that was substantially richer and more nuanced in its aesthetics and general presentation (Dube, 2010). I wonder if his daughter Marriam and her mother were the unintentional inspiration behind the other multiple reworkings of this painting, though many of these mother-daughter scenes in the documentary seem to be references to Khuli, Feni's sister who acted as his substitute mother. Either way, there is no way of knowing what would have become of his relationship with his daughter after the unbanning of political liberation movements in the early 1990s.

In theory, one would expect that without the 'physical separation' that grew into 'emotional separation' they would have had a chance to build a relationship if Feni had lived long enough to return to South Africa. However, theory is one thing and reality is another, as I discovered with my own story. 'Maybe, just maybe', to borrow Manganyi's (1996) phrase, the "pain of separation" is unbridgeable? Mphahlele (1979, p. 39) cites the poet Mazizi Kunene regarding exile, and his vision of home:

> "Our lives were ruined
>
> Among the leaves

We decayed like pumpkins

in a mud field…

Bitter, neither young nor old,

Heaving and heaving like a volcano,

Multiplying with fire:

I was all things…"

The shadow of Feni

I think it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how much Marriam's trip to New York to learn more about her father Feni and his life in exile changed her perspective from the moment she first learned who her father was. She met with people that he knew, had lived or worked with and befriended – his "new family" who emerged during his exile from South Africa amidst the continuing "pain of separation" from his entire family, including Marriam and her mother. We also learn from the documentary that Feni was also lost to his sister, and she was lost to him as evinced by some of Feni's paintings that he dedicated to her. The subject of loss is always a very complex one. Its boundaries are not always clear. Before concluding, I would like to look at Marriam's final reflections at the end of the documentary to think of the implications for her identity, sense of continuity, and her ability to move on.

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud (1953a) distinguished mourning from melancholia, conceptualising melancholia as a more indefinite and pathological form of mourning. I think that the basic definition of both mourning and melancholia that Freud (1953a) offered is a useful one for thinking of Marriam's journey ever since she found out about her father and with her reflecting on it after her father passed in 1991 after she visited New York to retrace his steps and life. His definition is that mourning, and melancholia is "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (p. 243). Mourning and melancholia thus can encompass either the loss of someone together with the ideal associated with that person, or alternatively only the loss of an ideal represented by someone or something, including anything else of personal or social significance for someone who is grieving a loss.

The tipping point from mourning to melancholia, Freud (1953a, p. 245) says, is that "there is a loss of a more ideal kind", implying that the "object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love…" He continues:

> In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has been lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss…but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him. (p. 245)

The transition from mourning to melancholia, he continues, is an unconscious one. With Marriam, we can critically engage with this basic definition on several levels. She is obviously not a patient. Apartheid South Africa was sick and insane, forcing individuals like Feni and others to choose to flee the country's madness and escape the oppressive grip and systematic dehumanisation (Khan, 2016). Cheng (2001, p. 20) put it best when she wrote, "in the long history of grief and the equally protracted history of physically and emotionally managing that grief on the part of the marginalised, racialised people… it has always existed for raced subjects both as a *sign* of rejection and as a psychic *strategy* in response to that rejection." I do not think the Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia is helpful in this situation, nor is it simply a question of whether only an unconscious factor or consciousness is at play. A helpful response and enlargement to the Freudian register of melancholy that is severely limited by its epistemic blind spot and colonial origins, Peterson (2019, p. 353) provides us with a nuanced sense of the ways in which "black melancholia" acts differently:

> …black people in colonial and apartheid society were regarded as nonhuman and their dehumanisation…meant that they were treated as labouring chattels in an extractive economy and, ostensibly, they had no subjectivity, voice and capacity for thinking and reasoning. In such a discursive schema, neither mourning or melancholia can be attributed to those who are infrahuman. To acknowledge black people as human would imply that they are capable of reason, voice and forms of subjectivity that encompasses a range of affective states and political objectives, as is seen in their recourse to narrative. The affirmation and representation of subjecthood…meant that black melancholia made possible a wide range of contestatory imaginaries and strategic political interventions…amongst these are, especially, the surfacing and giving expression to repressed ontologies, epistemologies and lived experiences that are fundamental to the articulation of counter-archives, discourses and memories of loss as well as imagining possible emancipatory futures.

Peterson's (2019) critical and generative theorisation of loss through a racial, historical, and social lens is compellingly demonstrated in *Zwelidumile* in every way, from the screenplay and production to the powerful use of sound effects. Freud (1953a) seems to revise the distinction between mourning and melancholy in *Group Psychology and*

the Analysis of the Ego (1953b) later almost in acknowledgement that the boundaries between them are not so clear cut in a move that Butler (2004a, 2004b) as well as Derrida (2001, 2004) reaffirmed in their own different ways in their view that mourning can be also as continuous as melancholia. The hypothesis I want to venture to put forward is that this distinction does seem superfluous when one thinks that they are both likely implicated or indistinguishable as a result of the lengthy history of grief in racialised people as Cheng (2001), Eng and Han (2019), Canham (2021; 2023) have previously argued, as well as demonstrating that it is an everyday lived reality resulting from the residue of this history. It is also in this light that we can look at grief as affective in the ordinary sense as 'sorrow' or 'sadness' that Peterson (2008), echoing Plaatje (2007), uses it, and as potentially critically enabling – Freud's (1934) 'critically observing agency'. Last thoughts Marriam shared with the interviewer:

> (*silent*)… We got the news from the ANC; they contacted my mom at work and they told her that he passed away and we had to wait two weeks while the arrangements were being made. When his body came my mom, myself went to the airport…that was the first time I saw him. I mean it was different and that was my first time. Apart from my grandmother, I've actually never seen someone who has passed away. I mean it was huge to me, he was big, I mean I could hear people saying 'why is she crying, she didn't even know him (*starts crying*)…this what people were saying, and I think for me, the crying was more because I didn't know him (wipes tears)…For me, you can live with somebody, I think for me it would've been impossible yeah because I think human beings are so complex, you can never say you know someone because we all show different faces at different times. So, the face he showed then was two different people and different things and that's what I have to live with, that it has always been an enigma. (Marriam Diale, in Suleman & Peterson, 2010)

To examine this reflection, one must not see it as closure but as an ongoing process. The way I can read the meaning of losing her father is through the lens of his lifelong absence in her life, her continuing quest to fill this void, and his passing. I think there is a difference between when you know that you do not know what you have lost in someone *versus* when you do not even know that you do not know what you have lost in someone. In the documentary, it appears that for her it is more of the former than the latter. It has been her pursuit since the age of eleven to know more of her father, something that was not possible because of the political ban of liberation movements and exiles. Despite learning more about her father and her heritage from the numerous people who knew Feni that she has met over the years since she first found out who he is, we as documentary viewers are left with the impression that Marriam feels unfulfilled. This feeling is reinforced by both her own words and her body language.

Her concluding sentiments, which she shared with the interviewer and us, the viewers, and witnesses of a brief portion of her life story and that of her father, were devoid of fulfilment or closure, and she acknowledged that she did not know him. Despite having met with people who knew him, he is still an enigma to her. She knows so many different versions of who he was to the people who knew him, she knows that she does not know what her version of him would have been if he had lived long enough to return home from exile. She knows that she and her mother have buried him, but she does not know who they have buried: Is it the absent father who was displaced from South Africa and banished into exile abroad and unable to return home? Is it her absent father that others knew in the different ways they knew him while he was still alive somewhere else, but not at home with her in South Africa? Someone that other people admired, but whose circumstances and distance from her prevented her from having the same opportunity to admire him as the others. Can she know him through his prodigious work and immeasurable talent? What about the hardship he endured in exile? How will it affect how she thinks about him and his absence from her? Was it worth the sacrifice? Was this her father, who had been absent from her life, whom she first saw as a corpse that they had buried but whose spirit had left the body? I am not certain if she is asking herself or anyone else these questions. I know I am asking some of these questions to myself and the film provokes us as viewers to do so too. We ask questions of *Zwelidumile* because we see ourselves in it, and because we witness Marriam's searching eyes and the interviewees' sense of loss piercing the silver screen.

It appears that the only way to address any of these questions is to pose new ones. One question is the initial transmission of loss that took place between Marriam and her mother. Children like Marriam and I inherited emotional archives that embody a transmission of grief and perhaps violence or trauma that we make meaning of in conjunction with other archives (Adonis, 2016; Padi et al., 2014). Other questions are about South Africa now, and how Feni's daughter's story and those of so many others that involve grief reveal the extent to which the country still needs to reckon with its histories and their shadows. A lot in postcolonial and post-apartheid South Africa still turns around ghosts, because a lot that happens recurs back to the country's history. A lot about contemporary South Africa feeds back into the mutually inclusive past, present and unfolding future. Marriam knows she has lost her father, Feni, yet she does not know what she has lost in him. After her closing remarks at the end of the documentary, we are left with the feeling that this is what she will have to learn to live *with*. We can ask, 'What is to learn to live *with*?', as did Derrida (1994, p. xvii). His response:

> If it – learning to live – remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death *alone*. What happens between two, and between all the "two's" one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost.

Through Mbembe (2002) we can also think of spectres as elusive figures. For Marriam, her father Feni's ghost, spoke solely through intermediaries and became a shared presence among all who honoured his memory and legacy. She *knew* it will have to be this way and maybe she had to learn to live *with* it. Her commitment to *The Dumile Family Trust* is perhaps proof of this. Marriam sued the owner of a Johannesburg-based art gallery in 2019 to recover the revenues of sculptures that the gallery had sold after asking the gallery to assist her in selling the sculptures on behalf of the Trust and her father's estate (Mothombeni, 2019). *The Dumile Family Trust* was founded in 2004, six years prior to the filming of the documentary *Zwelidumile* in 2010.

Marriam also helped to set up the website, *www.dumilefeni.co.za*, dedicated to her father's memory, archiving his works and a source of educational information about Feni. The website is also dedicated to the memory of Marriam, who until her passing, according to its homepage, devoted herself "tirelessly to her father and his works, and whilst doing so put together not only an astonishing archive giving a hitherto fore unknown insight into Dumile Feni, his family, his life and works, but also the most special collection of Dumile Feni works" (*www.dumilefeni.co.za*). *Zwelidumile* is a visual archive. "We are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end" Mbembe (2002, p.21). *Zwelidumile*, to use the words of Nettleton (2011), provides a visual addition to the 'writing' of the artist Feni 'into history'. Feni was more than an artist. He was also a husband and a father. Hamba Kahle Marriam. Thanks for sharing your story.

Archival refiguring: Storytelling in Bhekizizwe Peterson's vision

After watching the documentary *Zwelidumile*, I have a few new perspectives on exile and its afterlives. There were many who lived in exile and, as Feni taught us, had many difficulties. Yes, and those who chose to remain behind. Dodged the bullets, endured torture, lived under constant danger. Then there were those who were arrested and spent time in jail. Imprisoned under 24-hour surveillance and supervision. There were those who experienced exile and came back to be arrested. The apartheid-era exiles who became renegades and ran the possibility of being imprisoned, recruited as spies, or used as 'Askaris' (Dlamini, 2015). Next were the families that were left behind – fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and other family members missing. Feni died while in exile in 1991. Some like him have been brought home for reburial and closure. Many are still out there, in shallow graves. Imimoya yabo ayixolanga. Their spirits are not resting in peace.

Plaatje's (2007) *Native Life in South Africa* serves as a useful historical context for all of this. The stories of internal displacement recounted in this seminal text, written and published in 1916, combine in all these perspectives, including the costs incurred by and within families. He writes in the epilogue that it is a narrative of a 'melancholy situation'.

He goes on to capture stories such as those of the Kgobadi family. The family had to hastily move from their land and home after the Land Act came into force in June of 1913. They found themselves wandering and going nowhere with their livestock with no home. They lost their cattle along the way. Their baby succumbed to the cold winter and was buried in a makeshift grave they secretly dug up in one of the farms they came across during their journey. There are several of these stories Plaatje (2007) chronicled in *Native Life in South Africa*. In the chapter that Peterson wrote in the book that he co-edited with Remmington and Willan (2015) he writes about Plaatje's use of language and writing aesthetic in *Native Life in South Africa*. He cites Mphahlele (1979) right at the beginning of this chapter to argue that Plaatje's unique blend of irony, melodrama, parable, metaphor, orature, proverbs and the petition genre makes him a historian and writer of profound emotional narratives.

At the 4th *Narrative Enquiry for Social Transformation* or *NEST* conference in 2018, I presented a draft of the paper that later on we published (Canham et al., 2020) with colleagues at a panel discussion entitled "Triggering Objects: Narrating Grandparents through the Affective Object". Bhekizizwe Peterson was one of the main organisers of the conference. He also chaired or moderated the panel and facilitated the conversation between us and with the audience. In the paper, we explored the affective narratives of objects pertaining to our grandfathers for their value to recuperate erased colonial and apartheid social and personal histories. My cousin's and my contribution consisted of a body of published and unpublished newspaper writing by our grandfather from the 1930s to the 1970s. We discovered it a few years prior to the conference. Bhekizizwe Peterson raised several points in his closing remarks to the audience at the end of the panel discussion. He then turned to the panellists as if he wanted to ensure that we have heard the point, or if we had any doubts about the value of these narratives, that on the contrary, they are very important for addressing the silences and gaps in existing archives of our histories. His main point to us is captured in a chapter he (2002, pp.31, 35) published several years before the conference:

> The challenge is to find, assemble, catalogue and elucidate as much as possible of this material and to bring it into play in the public or institutional orbit… We have to create new expanses where one is able to reclaim the past, revisit the legacies of suffering and triumph, in ways that will help to transform our present reality.

The take home is…? Telling our stories in their complexity matters because our ability to imagine and create different futures is enhanced by it. In writing and producing the documentary, *Zwelidumile*, Bhekizizwe Peterson together with Ramadan Suleman follow in the footsteps of *Native Life in South Africa*. A visual chronicle and depiction of another 'melancholy situation' in South Africa. Narratives of ruin, destruction, and refuge.

Belonging and alienation, land and landlessness, home and homelessness. Histories of feelings. Present feelings. Of course, feelings can proceed from the future. The hopes, aspirations, and anxieties about the future. There is reason in feelings or feelings have a reason, and they are conveyed in stories. Telling or sharing stories makes us feel alive. When we feel alive, we feel human. That is the struggle captured in *Zwelidumile*, and our main task in the postcolonial, post-apartheid and decolonial milieu – how to reclaim our humanity in the aftermath of centuries of colonial and apartheid dehumanisation, or "to grasp, narrate and transcend the unfinished business of colonialism and apartheid and to lay to rest all sorts of ghosts that continue to haunt post-apartheid South Africa" (Peterson, 2019, p. 356).

Bhekizizwe Peterson's emphasis on the value of narratives in filling in historical gaps is reinforced by the conference experience as well as the documentary *Zwelidumile*. Storytelling is more than just a way to preserve the past – it is also essential for capturing the complexities of the black experience, reclaiming our humanity in the present, and shaping our future. In sharing stories, we not only bear witness to previous and ongoing struggles but also affirm our shared humanity, making storytelling an indispensable tool for individual and social transformation, meaning and healing (May, 2015). Hamba Kahle Professor Bhekizizwe Peterson.

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