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Introduction: The legacy of Bhekizizwe Peterson for Psychology in Society

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This special issue of PINS commemorates and celebrates the work and thought of the late renowned Professor of African literature and award-winning film-maker, Bhekizizwe Peterson. From different angles, the authors in this volume place psychology in dialogue with Peterson's work, continuing a transdisciplinary conversation in which he was a consistently generous and enlivening interlocutor. Contemporary imperatives to decolonise intellectual traditions and reconceptualise personhood and psychic life in historical, social and political terms, are articulated in a societal context (South Africa and beyond, across the continent and the globe) that is repeatedly described as 'in crisis'. In the here-and-now, the explicit agenda of PINS to explore psychology in society, entails theorising human life in pervasively dehumanising conditions of inequality, intergenerational trauma, and the precarity of planetary life. Peterson has much to say to these critical questions, and this special issue provides a unique opportunity for the readers of PINS to engage with his remarkable oeuvre of scholarly, artistic and activist work across the fields and modalities of literature, film, and literary and social criticism, opening up invigorating lines for re-thinking the disciplinary praxis of psychology.

Bhekizizwe Peterson's creative work as a film-maker trawls the subterraneous flows of psychic life, working with themes central to his critical vision of African Humanism: dignity, ubuntu, community praxis, relationality and ethics. The transformation of psychological questions into art offers us insights into the human condition by restoring the complexities of embodied and affective experience that are often

eviscerated by the conventional theoretical tools of the social sciences. Similarly, his scholarly work engages these thematic concerns in the long history of African archives and in contemporary cultural forms. Conversely, for Peterson, immersion in the life of the arts always entailed a simultaneous concern with and commitment to the art of life, weaving connections between the knowledge project of the academy and the creative collective flows of everyday life. His passionate vision for the Black Public Humanities is rooted in the extraordinary creativity and aesthetics of ordinary people in everyday life, and the potential for meaningful world-making in landscapes of human fragility. In particular, Peterson provokes us to think about how (traumatic) memory and (hopeful) imagination collide in the present moment, and how the narration of political, historical collective life is woven into the textures (and texts) of the present and personal storied selves. He thus provides us with generative resources for rethinking personhood and communal forms of human life.

The articles in this special issue are primarily developed from papers presented at the 6th international NEST conference, *The life of the arts and art of life: celebrating the work and thought of Bhekizizwe Peterson*, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 28 September – 1 October, 2022. Together with Jill Bradbury, Bhekizizwe Peterson was Principal Investigator on the NEST research project: *Narrative Enquiry for Social Transformation*. NEST is informed by the principle that narrative is a key defining feature of what it means to be human, and employs narrative theory-methods for tracing identities and visions as constructed through inter/cross-generational experience and storytelling; the transmission of family and community histories; alternative or resistant accounts by ordinary people that unsettle the normative perspectives of those in power; and the mutation and reconstruction of (cultural) memory. Narrative meaning-making is articulated in multiple modalities: textual, visual, archival, aural and performative. The processes of narrating the world and our-selves are always political and potentially transformative, mobilising human agency and generating possibilities for change.[1]

The interdisciplinary and intergenerational community of practice afforded by NEST has facilitated our thinking about narrative beyond its usual applications in psychology as an approach to the therapeutic encounter or as a set of research methods. Peterson's work gives impetus not only to theorise the arts and culture in relation to how they articulate lived-experience, but also to theorise life in and through art.

Peterson's contribution to the critical project of (un)making psychology as a discipline is taken up in different ways by the authors in this volume, who variously identify as social / narrative / political / critical / decolonial or even anti-psychologists. All of us share a passion for the PINS agenda to develop the theory, empirical research and therapeutic

1 An earlier collection of NEST scholarship was published in *PINS,* 2017 (55), *Narratives of Everyday Resistance*, a special issue edited by Hugo Canham and Malose Langa.

practice of 'psychology in society'. While the articles diverge to engage Peterson in ways that articulate with individual writers' research agendas, there are recurrent references across the board to Peterson's (2019a) paper, "*Spectrality and inter-generational black narratives in South Africa*". Peterson theorises 'black spectrality' and traces the ways in which traumatic memory infusing everyday life in the melancholic present, Bruising and brutal forms of oppressive structures and practices strangle the life out of black people not only through material deprivation and violence, but also through the damage and destruction of cultural resources. The effects of history cannot be consigned to the past and the formation of subjectivity, or ways of 'being-black-in the-world' (Manganyi, 1973) are perpetually shaped by these forces. This paper may arguably be the most overtly 'psychological' of Peterson's writings and thus presents an obvious entry-point for those more concerned with matters of life than art. However, to distinguish life from art in this way is antithetical to Peterson's approach in this particular paper and throughout his work. Even when his subject matter is ostensibly more concerned with his disciplinary field of African literature, Peterson insists that the making of art, in whatever modality, and the scholarly practices of analysis and criticism, are intertwined with everyday ways of being. His work is an exemplary exercise in 'rediscovering the ordinary' (Ndebele, 1986). All people, always, everywhere, are engaged in creative world-making, crafting individual lives in and through cultural resources, and in turn, transforming themselves and society. The papers in this volume demonstrate how Peterson enables us to think about psychology-in-society, and society-in-psychology.

PINS explicitly foregrounds the necessity to cross the disciplinary boundaries of psychology, particularly into domains more conventionally recognised as the terrain of sociology or politics, in our drive to both understand and change human conditions. In Peterson's traversing (and even transgressing) of disciplinary boundaries, he entices us to follow him into the arts, and particularly, biographical and fictional forms as ways of knowing and communicating truths about human experience. While these truths are contextual, historical and provisional, rather than universal or permanent, this underscores rather than undermines Peterson's pursuit of understanding. In addition to rigorous critique, both literary and political, Peterson's alchemic creative practices combine documentary detail with fictive invention, informing and simultaneously unsettling his readers and viewers, offering us a 'second handle on reality' (Achebe, 1988). Peterson's vision for the future is expansively Pan-African and he was preoccupied with the ways in which the (pre)colonial African archive might speak to present-day dilemmas, not through nostalgic acts of 'ethnographic salvage' (Garuba, 2001) but in fluid forms of 'culture as resistance' (Cabral, 1977). He confronts the complex questions of belonging and alienation, exile and home, not only in relation to continental and diasporic histories but critically, in relation the (de)formation of subjectivity. In as much as the global, continental and local troubles of the 21st Century are political in origin and thus require political resolution, these processes are articulated in and through our

capacity to (de)humanise one another. Peterson (2019b) embraces the notion of Ubuntu, by which practices of care sustain communal life and reciprocally develop humanity and humaneness. However, he simultaneously resists the concomitant tendency to reduce (particularly black) life to the social plane, erasing interiority and denying reflexive and agentic subjectivity.

While Peterson acknowledges the importance of modern forms of power and their sedimentation in individual lives and experiences, he persistently asserts this agentic subjectivity, even in victims of structural oppression. For Peterson, the problem of psychologizing social or political life, cannot be resolved by the inverse tendency to erase subjectivity or individuality. His work and activism on cultural productions and creativity, for example, attempt to make space for understanding *how* subjectivity may be formed and deformed in different contexts. The interwoven setup of personal and political domains demands that we venture into the structures of psychology with a renewed lens, one that takes seriously the role of the discipline in this era of neoliberal collapse. Critical and political psychologists have for some time pointed out the emergence of psychology as a discipline alongside economic, political, and cultural institutional economies and projects (see Hook et al, 2004; Duncan et al, 2001; Fox, Prillentensky & Austin, 2009; Painter, Terre Blanche & Henderson, 2006; Painter, Kiguwa & Böhmke; van Ommen & Painter, 2008; Parker, 2015; Burman, 2016; Prillentensky & Nelson, 2002; Sloan, 2000; Ratele, 2014; amongst others). Peterson's understanding and framing of interior lives as inextricably interwoven with social and political economies entails extrapolating concepts such as melancholy, love, identity, forgiveness, alienation, to unravel the temporal logics of psychic formations, social situations, and even cultural and popular productions such as *Kwaito* music. Understanding why individuals may choose and are influenced to cultivate and form particular types of intimacy and interiority within different economies and social contexts is threaded through Peterson's explorations and interrogations of personhood, social relations, and cultural productions. Likewise, his explorations of freedoms are demonstrated to be not just in the domain of state and institutions. Rather, freedoms are shown to also be operative in domains where individuals exercise their different capacities, as part of world-making in the everyday.

The special issue calls upon the discipline to think with Peterson on this capacity for world-making in the everyday as part of the current dilemmas and urgencies that we live with/in today. Our lived experiences include having to hold conflict and ambiguity, both in our everyday interactions but also in our therapy rooms and classrooms. Reflecting on the processes and practices of resistance, and the ways in which (inter)personal subjectivities are constituted in and through our relationships and in our professional practice, the question of how we find ourselves and others invites a world-making that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Peterson offers us resources for serious and playful attention to world-making, reflecting upon the ways that individuals theorise their lives

and the worlds that they live in, engaging the discomforts and failures of psychology to address the anxieties and tensions at the heart of narration of our lives. Each of the contributions take up different strands of Peterson's work to think alongside him on what it means to live, think, and feel through uncertainty, to articulate selves and futures, to consider the flows and processes of power beyond simple notions of asymmetrical relations between powerful and powerless, and the dynamic relation between theory and action.

The volume opens with Peace Kiguwa's paper, *Bhekizizwe Peterson's Black Love project*. Setting out to think about the act of writing, challenging disciplinary silos and developing decolonial practices in the academy, Kiguwa takes up Peterson's questions on the narratable subject and moral complexities of personhood. She considers his 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. Demonstrating the convergence with Narrative and African psychology scholarship, she argues for a more focused attention to narrative and moral imagination in narrating our lives.

Jill Bradbury engages Bhekizizwe Peterson in dialogue with her conceptualisation of narrative subjectivity as temporal, relational and embodied. This approach to re-thinking personhood is refracted through the ambiguous notion of *articulation* as, on the one hand, the expression of private thought and felt meaning in public discourse, and on the other, connection, conjoining or hinging together. She traces both of these senses in Peterson's work, following his trajectories of thought to think about psychosocial life, about human subjectivity as speaking ourselves into being, in shared language in relation with others, in the (extra) ordinary practices of everyday life.

In his paper, *Walking with Bhekizizwe Peterson: The shadows and afterlives of exile,* Nkululeko Nkomo provides critical reflections on Suleman and Peterson's film, ZweliDumile (2010). Nkomo interweaves the documentary narrative account of the artist, Dumile Feni, with his own personal story of an absent exiled father, connecting the story of the famous icon with the stories of more ordinary families deeply affected by the violent rifts of exile. Nkomo explores the ways in which these histories haunt the present, and in which the losses of childhood continue to sear adult subjectivities.

In a different geopolitical and historical context, Ann Phoenix connects Bhekizizwe Peterson's notion of 'black spectrality' to Derrida's (2012) 'hauntology'. Through close analysis of the retrospective narratives of adults now in old age, Phoenix demonstrates the deep psychological scarring inflicted on children through the systemic racism of the UK's education system which labelled them 'subnormal' and explicitly constrained their (and their parents') aspirational visions of future selves. While their adult achievements provide incontrovertible evidence that these earlier diagnoses (by teachers or

psychologists) were patently false, their retrospective narratives are riven by the hurt and trauma of these childhood experiences. Phoenix shows how Peterson's theorisation of black life not only travels across geographical space but also across disciplinary boundaries to deepen her psychosocial analysis of historical forms of race, racialisation and racism.

Again demonstrating the utility of Peterson's work and thought further afield in the global North, Molly Andrews thinks through his concepts of 'spectrality' and melancholia to explore East German narratives of transformational change in a longitudinal study stretching from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the present. Andrews explores the relationship between (political) history, the arts and knowledge. Despite the obvious divergences, there are remarkable resonances across contexts, as dreams and memories mutate across generations and people both despair and continue to imaginatively hope for radical social change.

The final paper in the volume is a review article in which Corinne Sandwith offers a rich, comprehensive analysis of Peterson's last editorial project, published posthumously in 2022 by Wits Press, *Foundational African Writers: Peter Abrahams, Noni Jabavu, Sibusiso Nyembezi & Es'kia Mphahlele*. Sandwith entices us to read not only this scholarly work, but the corpus of fiction and analysis bequeathed to us by these four significant literary figures. As Peterson always lamented, the cultural archive of Africa has been sorely neglected. Through this book, his dialogue with psychology is extended, inviting readers to explore the living archive of African literature, providing further narrative muscle for re-thinking human life across time and place.

The special issue closes with an Afterword, a beautiful tribute to Bhekizizwe Peterson written by Hugo Canham in the days of raw grief after his passing on 15 June 2021. Although this special issue offers both writers and readers the opportunity to commemorate the artistic and intellectual legacy of Peterson, we continue to feel the absent-presence and present-absence of our-person Bheki, whom we loved, the generous interlocutor who quickened our thinking, provoked our imaginations, and challenged us to be our best selves. For those who knew him and his work, we hope that this volume offers not only celebratory memory, but also stimulation to continue in dialogue with him. For those who did not, the special issue serves as an introduction to the thought and work of a remarkable 'organic intellectual', deepening our understanding of what it means to be human, particularly in dehumanising conditions. Bhekizizwe Peterson's invitation to all of us is to think, write, talk and act with aesthetics and ethics, to create new liberatory forms of knowledge and craft meaningful lives for our-selves and others.

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