

Global Sociology, spectrality and melancholy



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I, too, want to throw in my two cents worth in the conversation on this blog about migration. Or

enforced displacement (Alkan, 2024). Or slavery (Bahl, 2023; Santos, 2023, 2024). Or, in my case, political exile. These are distinct yet equally important sociological theoretical and empirical fields of study. There are certainly thematic overlaps between them. The point I want to make and illustrate on this blog is that in the long-standing history of human migration, from slavery's chains to political exile's shadows, a comprehensive global sociology of displacement must heed the emotional toll on those displaced, those left in its wake, critically interrogate the reverberations of displacement's aftermath, the silent and haunting sorrows that linger on. In general terms, we must learn to walk on the

fine line that separates the real world from the ghostly shadows that continue to trail the real (Bahl & Berger, 2023; Mishra, 2024; Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023; Santos, 2023).

Those who find themselves escaping their home countries do not always experience the warm welcome that one would wish for in the countries where they flee to find safety and asylum. In pursuit of EU's unity, post-crisis talks, austerity's decree, Bhambra (2016) captured the tide, far-right populism, hostility's stride. Immigrants viewed "as intrusions and as threats" (p. 195) from afar. Outside the Global North. Perceptions jar for us outside observers. South Africa unfortunately stands out in the

Global South for its xenophobia towards immigrants from other countries in Africa. Geographically disparate regions brought together by complex and convoluted colonial histories—xenophobic tensions in South Africa and anti-immigrant hostility in the EU.

Back to exile. Many left South Africa for political exile during the anti-apartheid struggle. It is not uniquely one country or the other's phenomenon. Let me share a three-act biographical narrative about the costs borne by those who leave their homeland for refuge in other countries and those who stay behind. It is lifted with no changes to the names of those who were interviewed, but slightly modified for the coherence of the

narrative from the documentary *Zwelidumile* about the life and times of the late South African painter and sculptor, Zwelidumile “Dumile” Feni (Suleman, 2010). ‘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.

Dumile fled South Africa in 1968 for political exile in England and then in the US. Shortly before his planned return to South Africa as the political negotiations between the apartheid government and liberation movements for a post-apartheid democracy were set to get underway, he died in New York City

in 1991.

I.

The first act in the narrative: the case of the curious daughter with an absentee father she has never met in-person. As a child growing up during the political turmoil of the 1980s in South Africa, Marriam's curiosity often led her down paths she was not ready to tread. There was a lot of secrecy going around. As Dlamini (2015, p. 8) notes, "apartheid generated an 'unwanted intimacy' between people that built an insidious complicity into daily life". One false move meant the difference between life and death. Many people knew that there were people leaving for exile, but it was something that

was barely spoken about, or when it was brought up, it was usually in very coded ways of speaking out of fear of reprisal from the apartheid security forces or their spies who lived in the same communities as the anti-apartheid activists. It was a simple conversation with a family member that planted the seed of doubt about her identity for Marriam. She learned that her father is not the man she thought she knew. Her “real” father had fled the country, leaving her with unanswered questions and a sense of longing for someone she had never known.

Marriam’s innocent mind could not comprehend the complexities of political exile. She held onto hope that her father was just a town

away, waiting to be found. Every unfamiliar face she encountered sparked a glimmer of recognition, a possibility that this stranger could be her missing link. It is also 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 only mentioned the present father in passing in the beginning of the interview about when she found out about her biological and absent father. Perhaps it was less

so than it appears.

Through Marriam's eyes, we see the human desire for connection, the need to belong to someone, somewhere. Her story reflects the broader narrative of fractured families torn apart by political repression and the resulting unrest, leaving behind a generation searching for their roots in a land of uncertainty. The spectral echoes of her absent father who was in political exile finds resonance in the trajectory of her own life narrative. A quest that involves her peeling back the layers of secrecy enveloping her identity, history and heritage.

II.

Another act in the narrative, it is

about missing home as a scent that is felt ever more intensely with the realisation that it may never be possible to return to your country for as long as there is still political instability or you are banned from returning. Exile changes a person in ways they never anticipate. For Dudu, it was the subtle reminders of his homeland that kept him tethered to his identity amidst the alienating embrace of England. Dudu was Dumile's friend before they left South Africa. They met up in England. The smell of a fellow South African in a crowded taxi became a lifeline, a brief respite from the overwhelming sense of displacement. 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).

As Dudu reflects on his journey, we see how exile not only physically separates individuals from their homeland but also erodes the intangible connections that define one's sense of self or identity. In his quest for familiarity, Dudu found solace in the mundane, seeking comfort in the shared experiences of his fellow countrymen who were also exiled. Through Dudu's story, we understand the profound and affecting experience of displacement on the senses, how the scent of home can

transcend borders and bring solace to the weary soul adrift in a sea of unfamiliarity.



Dumile Feni and Louis Moholo, exiles in London in 1971 by George Hallett. In the photo, Dumile Feni is the one on the left. Jazz drummer Louis Moholo, a South African, is seen on the right. He also went into exile.

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III.

The last act of the narrative conveys the sedimented fragments of

loss. Sorrowful. Saddening. Melancholic. Not in the Freudian (1917) register of melancholy as an indefinite, unassimilable or self-berating grief. Cheng (2001, p. 20) drives the point home: "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." In any case, it is a sense of a critical consciousness of loss. Psychically and socially. The weight of exile is heavy, bearing down on those forced to leave behind everything they hold dear. For Dumile, the pain of separation is compounded by the

knowledge that he may never see his family again. Forced to break ties to protect his loved ones from the oppressive regime, Dumile grappled with the guilt of abandoning them to an uncertain fate.

When he reflected on his twenty years in exile, Dumile's thoughts inevitably turned to his wife, left behind with a growing child. The ache of their separation gnawed at him—a constant reminder of the sacrifices made in the name of freedom. 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 Dumile had lived long enough to return to South Africa. Theory is one thing and reality is another.

Dumile’s story serves as a poignant reminder of the human cost of political upheaval, the shattered lives left in its wake. Through his eyes, we bear witness to the profound grief of loss and the enduring hope that someday, against all odds, he may be reunited with those he holds most dear. Mphahlele (1976, 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...*

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). Plaatje (2007) writes in the epilogue of *Native Life in South Africa* 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*. Peterson (2015) writes about Plaatje’s use of language and writing aesthetic in *Native Life in South Africa*. He argues that Plaatje’s unique blend of irony, melodrama, parable,

metaphor, orature, proverbs and the petition genre make him a historian and writer of profound emotional narratives. A global narrative sociology, in my opinion, is one that aims to uncover and portray the subjective narratives of the marginalised.

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”. One of the main organisers of the conference was Professor Bhekizizwe Peterson, one of the writers and producers of *Zwelidumile*. 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. The contribution my cousin and I authored was 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. Professor 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.



“History, by Dumile Feni, 2003, bronze.” The reproduction displayed outside the South African Constitutional Court, serving as a visual commentary on colonialism and apartheid, features two human figures sitting on and being pushed by another human figure. Copyright: [Jay Galvin](#).

In writing and producing the documentary *Zwelidumile*, Peterson and Suleman (2010) have offered a visual chronicle and depiction of a 'melancholy situation' during the anti-apartheid struggle 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 global colonial and apartheid dehumanisation.

Peterson and Suleman's (2010) 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 experiences, 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 social transformation and healing. I suppose my main point is that narratives can be useful in rethinking global sociological theories, methodologies and practice.

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