

Psychology and the problematic of “the African”

Abstract

In this commentary we extend Manganyi’s critique of Eurocentric and Western scientific practice of engaging the African Other as inherently strange and unfamiliar. This particular mode of representation and knowing the Other is functional in embodying a uniqueness that renders African bodies as non-human. It is also functional in reifying a science that pretends to objective practice. We take up Manganyi’s notion of making strange to interrogate some of the nuances of what it means to engage the Other in the context of a socio-political and historical analysis. We further present some of the problematics of trying to understand the current contexts of social ills in society through a lens that does not reproduce this dehumanising meaning of subjectivities and groups, and that does not end up making strange what we are trying to understand. Lastly, we posit some problematics concerning how Africans as colonised peoples have been made strange to themselves and become entangled in relations of violence and power that make the familiar unfamiliar even to themselves.

Making strange: When the familiar is made unfamiliar

On the 22nd of March 2017 lightning strike leads to a widespread and devastating fires across Knysna in the Western Cape. Just over a year and a half later on the 20th October 2018 equally widespread and devastating fires spread through the township of Khayelitsha in the Western Cape after a shack caught alight. These two incidents embody the face of a so-called post-apartheid South Africa that continues to be comfortable with widespread economic and social disparities. Martin Terre

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Blanche (2006) has characterized this dual and sharp socioeconomic divide in South Africa as akin to two nations simultaneously existing within one country.

We introduce our commentary with these two incidents to highlight the presence of structural violence in how certain disasters come to exist. The socioeconomic conditions under which many black South Africans continue to live reflect the continued injustices of a state and structurally endorsed violence against a group of people. The Khayelitsha fire remains a damning reminder of the black condition in post-apartheid South Africa. In her book, **Impossible mourning**, Kylie Thomas (2014) discusses the impossibility of mourning bodies that in essence are un-mournable. We take up this notion of un-mournable bodies to reflect on Manganyi's critique of a Psychology that has addressed itself to an "African subject" in generalising and problematic ways.

We locate Chabani Manganyi's writing within a specific time but argue that his critique remains a profound indictment of Psychology's continued failure in engaging this problematic of the "African". We ask: how can we read Manganyi today in a material, socio-political and economic context where a majority of black African bodies remain un-mournable to a society trying to heal from its past? In turn, what does this mean for a discipline and its projection toward a future in which it remains relevant?

Structural violence and its devastating impact in society cannot be removed from the psychological effects on those affected by it. Part of the governance of any oppressed group in society is the psychological relation of themselves to others and with themselves. In this intricate web, a psychological form of oppression that helps sustain the broader structures of oppression is made possible. Manganyi rightly critiques Eurocentric and Western scientific knowledge claims that attempt to make the familiar unfamiliar, that attempt to imprison African bodies into a universal and essentialist knowledge prism and that in essence turns these bodies into something strange (and by implication, non-human). Whether this is done via constructs of the African subject as infantile, exotic, barbaric and uncivilised, the representation of black bodies within racializing scientific discourse serves particular functions: bodies become un-mournable, dispensable, non-human. Manganyi (2018) highlights this in his assertion that: "This failure to recognize human-ness as a quality that resides within the black body comes to function not only as mode of knowing in the world more generally but also to the people who inhabit these bodies." We extend Manganyi's (2018) phrase "making strange" to reflect on how many Africans have been made strangers to themselves. This process of making strange exists at multiple levels: the ways we read ourselves and others like us, and how we relate to our sense of being human.

A Psychology that heals

Across the continent multiple and intersecting forms of violence continue to undermine the wellbeing of communities and people: State violence in the form of poverty; state indifference to crime and social suffering within communities; interpersonal violence, for example, intimate partner violence; intergroup violence, for example, xenophobia, homophobia and violence against women more broadly; and intra-psychic violence, for example, increased suicides. These problems cannot be dismissed as simply a failure of governance but must be understood in a broader historical context that properly understands and locates the psychosocial impact of oppression and dehumanisation. Recently, the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) launched the first practice guidelines for psychology professionals working with sexually and gender-diverse people – a first of its kind in South Africa and the continent. This has occurred at the same time as mass arrests of sexual and gender diverse persons continue in Tanzania. State-directed violence in other forms against its citizens continues unabated on the continent. The task at hand for Psychology to be relevant is to explicitly and directly engage these intersections of structural and intrapsychic violence in ways that do not re/produce modes of knowing that only function to “make strange”. For example, how do we address ourselves to gender-based and homophobic violence in society that properly tackles the sociohistorical and colonial rootedness of these social malaises? How can this be accomplished in ways that do not merely reproduce essentialising and pathologizing modes of knowing particular types of bodies and their locatedness in society? Floretta Boonzaier (2017) draws our attention to this troubling mode of inquiry within the scientific and broader community in her critique of the coverage and analysis of the Anene Booysen gang rape and murder in the small town of Bredasdorp in the Western Cape.

Should Psychology not be able to serve this function, we must ask: what is its purpose? We would argue that Psychology as a discipline can only fully serve this function if we participate in it differently. Our role and responsibilities lie in the active work of challenging, contesting, producing knowledge that refuses the invitation to locate as “strange” and “unfamiliar” particular subjects and bodies. This making strange and inferiorising of particular (black) bodies is often justified by so called scientific findings. As Manganyi (2018: 11) points out: “the discourse on the intellectual inferiority of blacks is a resplendent inscription (a substitution) proffered by empiricist psychological science. Sanitised with a bountiful presence of numerical representation, this kind of ‘science’ of the Other fails in its mission to *make us know its objects* (know in the sense of knowledge)”. We imagine and call for a psychology that makes it difficult to accept scientific data as evidence in and of itself – without doing the work of connecting to a society’s historical past as a continued presence.

A people (healed) that heal

For a people whose being and existence has been questioned, dismissed, fractured, and practically nullified, the work of re-humanising needs to happen at multiple levels (in the ways in which we have come to engage with processes of gender, culture, language, values, ubuntu and what it means to be human, etc). This work of re-humanising happens through activist and academic work that does not impose and perceive people (Black) as the “Other” but respectfully acknowledging the knowledge and resources they have and draw from on a day-to-day basis (see Ramose, 2002; Segalo, 2014; Kessi, 2018; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2018, to name a few). We argue that for healing and mending of fractured souls to take place we need to step back and acknowledge the work that psychology needs to do for it to be relevant and to respond to ways in which healing can take place. This would require the discipline to self-reflect, acknowledge its complacency in the project of legitimising oppressive practices that made people strangers to themselves, and be willing to redefine its role in society. Manganyi (2018: 6) asks: “what does it matter who is speaking?” We deem this a critical question to ask as we believe those who have been silenced and carry wounded bodies and psyches are better placed to know and articulate their experiences. Therefore, it is pertinent for bodies that have been deemed unworthy, un-mournable, replaceable, and with fractured souls to have a voice to articulate their subjectivities. The fractured souls of people and the breaking of communities mean careful consideration has to be taken when the mending takes place, and this would require a collective effort where a chorus of multiple voices contributes towards how the process of healing might look like. Black people have doubt, mistrust, anger, and have to contend with perpetual social injustices on a daily basis as a result of living in a world that has been created to systematically exclude them. Healing of people’s wounded souls would require a radical uprooting and confrontation of processes and structures that contribute to continued dehumanisation. Such a process might offer the possibility of making that which has been made strange familiar again.

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