

# Accounting for ourselves and others: Living psychosocial hauntologies

## Abstract

*Bhekizwe Peterson's interdisciplinarity was wide ranging and displayed his easy familiarity with the Arts, Social Sciences and Philosophy. The breadth of his interests and oeuvre make him genuinely psychosocial, interested, for example, in psychoanalytic issues of mourning and melancholia and bringing this together with deep understandings of narratives and the ways in which the archive demonstrates that assumptions of intergenerational ruptures are overblown since, for example, mourning, melancholia and the rewriting of the archive was a feature of pre-1994 Black South Africa so that pre-1994 has left a wake in the present and for the future.*

*This article takes up Bhekizwe's focus on haunting by considering how people position themselves in psychosocial, intersectional histories. provoked by everyday subjection to racism. It analyses 'found narratives', traces of particular people and/or groups, captured in, for example, filmed documentaries or social media as well as media interviews. It argues that their accounts of everyday subjection to racism are linked to psychosocial, intersectional histories in ways that demonstrate the importance of recognising that unacknowledged histories of racism haunt the present, reproducing the dehumanizing of groups subjected to racism and potentially spurring those affected to consciousness and calls for political action.*

## Introduction

While Bhekizwe Peterson was a professor of African literature and a renowned filmmaker, his interdisciplinarity was wide ranging and displayed his easy familiarity with the Arts, Social Sciences and Philosophy. The breadth

## Ann Phoenix

Thomas Coram  
Research Unit,  
Social Research Institute,  
UCL Institute of Education,  
University College London,  
London

[a.phoenix@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.phoenix@ucl.ac.uk)  
[0000-0001-5382-8918](tel:0000-0001-5382-8918)

## Keywords

*melancholia, hauntology,  
historical trauma, racism in  
education, found narratives*

Attribution CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

of his interests and oeuvre makes him genuinely psychosocial. A recurrent theme in his oeuvre is the contemporary resonances of apartheid and the ways in which traumatic histories are part of contemporary personal lives and the ways in which they are imagined and storied. In doing so, he brings together issues of mourning and melancholia with deep understandings of how contemporary narratives are imagined. By examining the archive alongside political imagination, he demonstrates that ideas of intergenerational discontinuities that assume ruptures between the past and present are overblown (Peterson, 2002). In the South African case Peterson makes clear that mourning, melancholia and the rewriting of the archive was a feature of pre-1994 Black South Africa and so is not a recent development. In Christina Sharpe's (2016) terms, he recognises that apartheid has left a 'wake'.

Far from being the watershed moment of "limitless hope" (Mhlongo 2004, p. 58) that 1994 was meant to be, the contestations and conversations have, in some respects, played out as social dramas and ones that are akin to spectral performances where the continuities and discontinuities between the past, present and future continue to haunt the social formation. (Peterson, 2019b, p. 345)

Narrative researchers have long recognised that narratives, the stories we tell to ourselves and others, link the past, present and future, which are not as clearly separable as is often thought (Andrews et al., 2014; Riessman, 2008). Increasingly, from different theoretical perspectives, social theorists are recognising that the past haunts the present (Freeman, 2010; Frosh, 2013; Layton, 2019). In other words, personally and socio-structurally, we do not leave the past behind but, as the novelist William Faulkner suggests, in *Requiem for a Nun*, the past 'is not even past'. It is, therefore, becoming commonplace for researchers and theorists across many disciplines, including literature and art, to recognise that historical events and their consequences permeate and impact on the contemporary world as part of collective (un)consciousness influencing the everyday. Barack Obama (2008), then president of the United States, made clear that a central way in which the past is sedimented into the present is through the pervasive impact of histories of enslavement on US society:

As William Faulkner once wrote, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past." We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. (Barack Obama, March 18, 2008, A Perfect Union speech)

In thinking of how particular pasts become part of the present for people who were not there when they happened, some scholars focus on intergenerational transmission,

examining how parents pass on narratives to their children (Fivush, 2019). Others have examined intergenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma, examining both verbal and non-verbal ways in which it is transmitted (Greenfeld, Reupert and Jacobs, 2023).

There is, however, much that remains unclear about how the past inflects the everyday present. This paper makes a small contribution to addressing that issue. It takes up Bhekizizwe Peterson's focus on spectrality, haunting, embodiment and narrative by considering how autobiographical writing and narratives, provoked partly by everyday subjection to racism in the UK, accounts for the writers' formations and identities. It particularly considers the ways in which people position themselves in psychosocial, intersectional histories. What do their narratives highlight as mattering to their understanding of their stories and what do they exclude? In other words, how do they account for themselves in all their complexity. The analyses below fit with Peterson's focus on the embodied philosophies of Black (mainly African) writers whose lives have often been hidden from history and his generative work on black humanities. Peterson's work on spectrality and haunting is concerned with thinking about how intergenerational "continuities and discontinuities between the past, present and future continue to haunt the social formation" (Peterson, 2019b, p. 345). He shows how assumptions about radical ruptures between the apartheid and post-1994 South African contexts are misguided in that there were always resistances and theorisations that have contemporary resonances, as well as the melancholic legacies of racist colonization. Peterson (2019b) analyses visual art, novels and films to examine intergenerational hauntings and attempts to make sense "of the contradictions, tensions, ironies and paradoxes that are symptomatic of life under segregation, apartheid and post-1994 South Africa" (p. 345). This paper departs from, and contributes to, the body of work Peterson expands and engages with by focusing on one Black UK generation and offers social science analyses of the ways in which, as children, they were subjected to hauntings that have marked impacts on their lives, even as they resist in adulthood. While it does not focus on the same specific issues and sources that Peterson does, it is in resonant dialogue with him in drawing on narrative perspectives to consider the ways in which the past, present and future are imbricated.

Much of the work on intergenerational transmission of autobiographical memory and of trauma draws on interviews, questionnaires or observations. However, attempting to gain a holistic picture requires taking broad perspectives and the paper also draws on what Burman (2019; 2022), focusing on childhood, calls 'found childhood', material traces of childhood. Burman is concerned to understand how childhood has to be understood as produced through multiple, unstable sets of practices whose forms and interpretation are diverse and contested, rather than unitary. For Burman, found childhood enables the recognition of the necessary interlinking of political economy of childhood and geopolitical dynamics as well as local practices in contexts where histories

of colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism intersect. An important advantage of the method is thus that it allows a more holistic understanding of the multiple ways in which childhood are produced, impacted on and expressed unfiltered through adult ideologies. That holism entails recognition that some histories can have very different impacts in the present depending on how people are positioned. Intersectionality is, thus, central to hauntology. The understanding of which categories are being evoked in any social situation and how social locations, emotional attachments and power relations make a difference (Anthias, 2020; Hill Collins, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2011) is not necessarily self-evident. Nor can it be assumed that racialised relations are only playing a part in interactions when identified as doing so.

In this paper, I have adapted Burman's method to analyse found narratives, traces of particular people and/or groups, produced in, for example, filmed documentaries or social media as well as media interviews. The paper first briefly discusses hauntology. It then presents accounts of everyday subjection to racism and the ways in which these link to psychosocial, intersectional histories. Where relevant, the paper draws on Peterson's published accounts to illuminate the analysis.

## **Hauntology leaves a wake**

It is perhaps particularly apt to draw on Derrida's (1994/2012) notion of 'hauntology' in drawing on Peterson's work to take forward understandings of how histories are part of the ways in which people account for themselves. Derrida starts his dedication in *Specters of Marx*, where he introduces the concept of hauntology by discussing 'the historic violences of Apartheid' as metonymic and symbolic of many kinds of global violence (p. xiv) and dedicates the book to Chris Hani, leader of the South African Communist Party and chief of staff of uMkhonto we Sizwe, the paramilitary wing of the African National Congress, who had recently been assassinated in South Africa. Furthermore, Derrida posits spectrality as inextricably linked with the absence of social justice for those already dead and those not yet born, spelling a non-contemporaneity of the present as well as the importance of social justice.

There is increasing interest in the ways in which histories of racism haunt the present (Cain, 2015). In literature, Toni Morrison powerfully explored this notion in her 1987 novel, *Beloved*. Davis (2005) identifies two sources that have influenced use of the word hauntology. First, the French philosopher Derrida coined the term in his *Spectres of Marx* (1994). It plays on the words haunting and ontology. Colin Davis (2005, p. 373) suggests that "undisclosed traumas of previous generations ...disturb the lives of their descendants even and especially if they know nothing about their distant causes." According to Davis, (2005) hauntology replaces "the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive". The second (less acknowledged) source cited by Davis (2005) is from

the psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1978). Abraham and Torok were concerned with transgenerational communication and the ways in which “the undisclosed traumas of previous generations might disturb the lives of their descendants even and especially if they know nothing about their distant causes” (Davis, 2005, p. 373). Hauntology is, therefore, about the ways in which elements from the past return or persist in the present. For Derrida, these elements come back in a different form and mean different things in later contexts.

The notion of ‘hauntology’ that he [Derrida] developed in *Specters of Marx*, an ontology of the ghostly as opposed to an ontology of presence, has indeed contributed to a profound renewal of disciplinary fields as diverse as geography (Holloway & Kneale, 2008), cultural criticism (Fisher, 2012; Hardcastle, 2005) and, more recently, notably via a special issue published in *ephemera* (Pors et al, 2019), in the field of management studies (Di Domenico & Fleming, 2014; Pors, 2016a, 2016b). As Pors et al. (2019) point out, the ghost is not just another conceptual category or metaphor. Disturbing the established criteria of knowledge, navigating between presence and absence, the ghost is not a metaphor nor another concept. As Pors et al. (2019) point out, the hollowness of the ghost suffuses the category of space and time, sealing an encounter with the Other. (Migheli, 2022, p. 277)

Haunting can produce spurs to consciousness and calls for political action. Avery Gordon (2011, p. 3), for example, suggests that futurity is imbricated or interwoven into the very scene of haunting itself... haunting is an emergent state: the ghost arises, carrying the signs and portents of a repression in the past or the present that is no longer working”.

While Derrida drew on the metaphor of ghosts and haunting, Christina Sharpe develops the metaphor of ‘in the wake’ to address the pervasive permeation of histories of enslavement into the present.

Wakes are processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual; they are the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the deceased from death to burial and the accompanying drinking, feasting, and other observances; a watching practiced as a religious observance. But wakes are also “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)”; finally, wake also means being awake and, most importantly, consciousness. Living in the wake

as people of African descent means living what Saidiya Hartman identifies as the both the “time of slavery” and the “afterlife of slavery,” in which “black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment”. (Sharpe, 2014, p. 60)

The sociologist Paul Gilroy (2005) suggests that ‘postcolonial melancholia’ characterises post-slavery nations and results from the denial of the impact of slavery and the losses that would be entailed by acknowledging those impacts. Similarly, the feminist political scientist and psychoanalyst, Jane Flax (2010, p. 3), suggests that denial of the impact of slavery leads to “sometimes paralyzing wishes to magically erase the living past rather than engage in the arduous processes of realistically facing its effects and constructing practices to ameliorate them”. Once hauntings, absences and erasures make their ghostly presence felt, repression no longer works, and something must be done (Davis, 2013, pp. 53-4). The following sections of the paper consider extended narrative examples that illustrate and illuminate the relevance of hauntology to understanding the everyday.

## **Everyday hauntology reproduces racialised inequalities in UK education**

The UK televising of Lyttanya Shannon’s documentary *Subnormal: A British Scandal* on BBC television on 20 May 2021 when many people were at home because of Covid-19 restrictions. Lyttanya Shannon produced the film in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in the US and the eruption of Black Lives Matter protest that followed, as well as the producer Steve McQueen’s *Small Axe* series of televised dramas about Black people’s lives in the 1970s. *Subnormal* tells the story of how black children from the English Caribbean or with parents from the Caribbean (called ‘West Indian’ at the time), were disproportionately classified as Educationally Subnormal (ESN) in the 1960s and 1970s and placed in ESN schools. This overrepresentation was well known to Black Caribbeans in the UK. In a widely read book, Bernard Coard (1971) documented the process by which Black Caribbean children were constructed as educationally subnormal more than 50 years ago . There have been many campaigns against this process and the institution of many Saturday schools designed to counter the negative impact of schools on Black children’s attainment and identities (Chevannes and Reeves, 1987; Dhondy et al., 1982).

Yet, while the discriminatory over-representation of Black children in schools for the ‘educationally subnormal’ was well known to some, Lyttanya Shannon’s film achieved three things that brought the injustice of the issue to wider attention. First, it focused on the narratives of adults who had been through the process of being erroneously classified as ‘educationally subnormal’ and allowed them to tell their own stories about the impact that attending ESN schools has had on them throughout their lives.

Given the shame associated with this categorization and because people who have been considered to have learning difficulties are often not consulted about their own stories, it was groundbreaking to be able to see and hear four people tell their stories. This is a particularly important achievement in that many people approached did not wish to be publicly identified and some explained that they had not even told their wider families. Second, the documentary revealed that this was "part of an unofficial segregation policy in the 1960s, which saw hundreds of black children labelled "educationally subnormal" and moved out of mainstream schools by the state" (Nicholson, 2021). Indeed, the documentary reveals that the Inner London Education Authority recorded that they knew that most of these Black children were not 'educationally subnormal'. There was, however, a degree of disquiet amongst the white population, some of whom did not want their children to go to school with Black children who they considered would lower standards. Indeed, bussing was introduced in the UK and implemented by some boroughs (Esteves, 2018; Killian, 1979). For example, Ealing borough council dispersed Black and Asian schoolchildren from 1963-1981 and only stopped when they were found guilty of educational discrimination (Bebber, 2015). Third, because the screening followed widespread protests about the murder of George Floyd by policemen in the US and the ways in which Black Lives frequently do not matter in many countries and was in a period of Covid-19 lockdown, it was widely viewed. Many people were outraged by the evidence it portrayed of systemic racism in the education system.

David Gillborn (2008) applies Annette Lareau's US notion of 'concerted practices' to research findings to argue that the English education system maintains racialised inequalities by reinforcing white privilege and legitimating racist policies and practices towards black children. The documentary *Subnormal* lends support to Gillborn's argument. There is ample, longstanding evidence that educational attainment at all levels, in many countries is patterned by differences of racialisation, social class and gender (Crawford et al., 2017; Hutchings, 2021; Strand, 2021). These have shifted little, despite decades of patient documenting of inequalities (Salisbury-Joseph et al., 2022; Gillborn et al., 2022). The question thus arises of how this continues to occur. It is here that the concept of hauntology can assist the task of taking a complex, holistic view of racialised educational inequalities.

Shannon's documentary was met with widespread critical acclaim that praised the clarity of the evidence presented in *Subnormal* showing that historically, it was taken-for-granted, despite lack of evidence, that black African Caribbean children are educationally inferior. Not only were the adults presented in the film convincingly able to show that they had never been educationally subnormal, but the then Inner London Educational Authority had committed to paper their knowledge that most of the black children categorized as educationally subnormal and sent to 'special schools' were not.

So how could so many educational psychologists make such deleterious, inaccurate and racist categorisations?

The widespread miscategorising of ‘West Indian’ children as educationally subnormal shows how easy it is for members of a society permeated by taken-for-granted inequalities to accept these inequities as justified and so to ascribe inequities to children’s performances in ways that are not warranted. The first black British educational psychologist, Waveney Bushell, for example, appeared in the *Subnormal* documentary and explained that children who had recently come from the Caribbean would sometimes use Caribbean words and be assumed to be ignorant of both concepts and ‘proper English’. Waveney Bushell gave the example of Caribbean children she tested who did not know the word ‘tap’ but knew the object they referred to as a ‘pipe’. This apparently trivial example is only understandable if we consider the socio-historical context. The US Caribbean academic Sylvia Wynter (2003) historicises contemporary racialised positioning by pointing out that the very definition of ‘Man’, which has changed from religious to enlightenment ideas, has always omitted Black people from the category human and entailed the taken-for-granted dehumanizing of Black people in transatlantic enslavement. This is an important point in that it suggests that ideas that haunt society can continue to do so, even though the ways in which they are brought into being in the everyday shift over time. Marika Sherwood (2001) gives a helpful example of this.

...from the mid-nineteenth century, political and commercial developments --the building of an empire and the containment of labour troubles at home, as well as the necessity of providing appropriately lucrative employment for the new middle classes and the younger sons of the nobility -- required the institutionalising of an earlier myth of the superior Englishman, now with a civilising mission. It required also the derogation of everyone else into an immutable racial hierarchy whose bottom rung was occupied by Africans. (Sherwood, 2001, p. 1)

Wynter’s work fits with contemporary analyses that show how our social understandings are inseparable from the conditions in which they were produced. Gurminder Bhambra (2023) and Ali Meghji (2021) illuminate the ways in which Sociology’s origin stories fail to address its inextricable linking with colonialism and the aftermath of the Atlantic slave trade. As Wynter (2003) makes clear, long-standing assumptions and power relations produce a ‘coloniality of being’ that, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 243) succinctly explains, is “maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self... as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday.”



...[W]e live in an anti-Black world--a systemically anti-Black world; and, therefore, whites are not [simply] “racists.” They too live in the same world in which we live. The truth that structures their minds, their “consciousness,” structures ours. (Wynter 2006, p. 7)

This goes some way to explaining how many different people within the education system (educational psychologists, teachers, education officers) can go along with prevailing racist ideas and enact and reproduce them in their everyday practice, including as part of doing their jobs. It also means that recognising the injustice of one set of practices does not necessarily lead to changes that redress inequities because the underlying ideologies remain invisible and unchanged. In this, case the dehumanizing of black people, which includes repeated attempts to prove that they are less intelligent than white people (Richards, 2012) continue implicitly to haunt society and are affective (Zembylas, 2022). As Sherwood (2001) suggests, as the context shifts, so do the ways in which these ideologies are reproduced. This helps to explain how knowledge about a particular child can fail to register with an educational psychologist without apparently causing ethical dilemmas for those contributing to ‘concerted practices’ of pathologising particularly groups (Gillborn, 2008). So, while the day after *Subnormal* aired, the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP) in the UK accepted responsibility for this epistemically violent history, this does not guarantee that they will not perpetuate racism in other ways through other practices. Indeed, educational psychologists Kulig-Reid and O’Hare, (2023) point out that the DECP, while suggesting a commitment to change, did not actually apologise and that much more needs to be debated and changed to make a difference. It is also important to recognise that, as times change, everyday practices also change (Sherwood, 2001) while dehumanising, racist ideas can continue to haunt society (Wynter, 2016).

The construction of black children as inferior and inadequate shows how the power relations that enable teachers, school authorities and educational psychologists to make such judgements also dehumanise them. The power of such categorisations is demonstrated by the fact that debates about the ‘under-attainment’ of black Caribbean children have continued in the same terms for more than fifty years, with politicians continuing to promulgate deficit models, despite the numerous pieces of research done since the 1960s that challenge the reproduction of such normative assumptions (Gillborn et al., 2022; Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2022).

The notion of hauntology helps to historicise the categorization of Black children as ‘educationally subnormal’ and the ways in which this is linked to their exclusion from normative humanity. The question remains, however, of how this haunting becomes embodied by the Black children who are subjected to it. The section below discusses

some of the ways in which the hauntings that produced their ‘educational subnormality’ both impact on the children and are embodied and, when they become conscious of the inequities informing the hauntology, enables and provokes resistance.

### **Embodying hauntology: Shame, diminishment and resistance**

The adults who took part in the *Subnormal* documentary are unusual amongst black adults who had been categorized as educationally subnormal because most refused to speak publicly. This in itself says something about the embodiment of the effect of this racialised haunting. It clearly produces shame and the desire to hide one’s personal history and self.

The *Subnormal* documentary was powerful because it presented the first-person narratives of people who had not previously spoken out about what happened to them. Their accounts show that racist treatment at school subjectifies children in ways that have long lasting consequences. The two extracts below come from transcripts from the documentary of what Noel and Maisie say. They explain the consequences of having been categorised as educationally subnormal and how they have attempted to counter that categorisation.

**Narrator:** 54-year-old Noel lives in north London. During the 1970s, he believes he was wrongly sent to a school for the so-called educationally subnormal.

**Noel Gordon:** My son says to me, “you’ve got a lot, haven’t you? How long have you studied?” I said, “Well, I did a lot of studying when I was younger.” I had to do it because I needed to get a decent job.

**Narrator:** Today, he has thirteen separate qualifications, including a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education.

**Noel:** I suppose I’m proud of them because I was told that I was stupid, you see? I was told I was dunce. So, it was hard going to school and what then was—they call them special schools now. But it was we didn’t have proper lessons. That’s why I can’t spell today. Leaving school without any qualifications is one thing, right? But leaving school and thinking you’re stupid, it’s a different ball game altogether, because it knocks your confidence. You haven’t got no confidence.

**Narrator:** Noel is a self-published author who runs voluntary workshops to inspire young children.

**Noel:** It turns out I actually like education. I think there was a candle, a little

flame burning inside me saying that, you know, “stuff you lot,” you know? When get out of college, that’s when I’m going to learn. We developed this resilience because we know how messed up the system is.

/.../

**Narrator:** After almost seven years in ESN schools, an educational psychologist agreed that Maisie should return to mainstream education. But she never truly caught up. As an adult, education became a priority.

**Maisie Barrett:** So, I would do anything. I did Law. I did Japanese. I did A-level English, even though I didn’t have a GCSE in English.... I just wanted to be there because I just wanted to take in the information.

**Narrator:** Maisie eventually studied for a degree in Caribbean studies and creative writing, and is currently writing her third book. But being labelled educationally subnormal has left her with low confidence, and she’s struggled to find a lasting career.

**Maisie:** I just spent most of my time at these courses when I should have been with my children. I could have been working and making money. I did not have to be sent to a special school. I’m hoping that one day I will be successful. I haven’t given up on my dreams.

The adults in the documentary spoke, publicly for the first time, about the trauma that led them to keep that aspect of their histories secret. They thus embodied trauma in ways that produced shame, pain and eventually, feelings of injustice. While relatively little is known about how historical trauma links with contemporary trauma, an increasing number of researchers analyse the ways in which histories of enslavement and colonialism have deleterious effects on the health, life chances and everyday experiences of descendants of those enslaved and colonised (Sharpe, 2016; Walker et al., 2011). Both Maisie and Noel indicated they had compensated for the damage to their identities and feelings of self-worth by, for example, spending long periods as students gaining several qualifications and so having less time to spend with their children than they otherwise would. Their history, therefore, affected not only themselves, but also had intergenerational impacts, affecting their children in this, and no doubt many other implicit ways. As adults, the histories that haunt their lives have made it difficult for them to rest and led them to work continually to prove to themselves and others that they are not educationally subnormal. Not only are they haunted by the histories that racialise Black people as inferior, but they are personally haunted. They exemplify the ways in which “collective histories inform our current individual modes of being and the

traces of the past create the contours of present life, and constrain our imaginative future projections” (Bradbury, 2020, p. 5).

At one level, both above extracts from Noel and Maisie describe success stories. Both have achieved the awards of more than one degree and gained many other qualifications despite having been sent to schools for the educationally subnormal. It is clear, however, that both have had to work hard to compensate for the negative ways in which they were constructed and the shame and trauma of being treated as intellectually lacking. The fact that this has been costly to them both is demonstrated particularly in Maisie’s last turn above, when she says “I just spent most of my time at these courses when I should have been with my children. I could have been working and making money. I did not have to be sent to a special school. I’m hoping that one day I will be successful. I haven’t given up on my dreams.” For Maisie, the opportunities she has had to forego in proving herself because of how she was categorised include not spending enough time with her children and not earning as much money as she could otherwise have done. She also makes it clear that she still has dreams that have not been fulfilled. There are, thus, intergenerational costs to what her schooling did to her that persist although she now knows that her treatment was part of a racist narrative of ‘West Indian’ children.

For Noel, Maisie and hundreds of others, the national, normative story of black, West Indian children subjectified them in ways that were painful and dehumanising. Their accounts dispel notions that what happened to them is just one unfortunate event in their lives that is simply in the past. In an interview with the *Voice* newspaper following the broadcast of *Subnormal*, Noel expressed his disagreement with those who say he should leave the past behind.

People need to walk in my shoes before they start saying things like that. I, and others like me, are living with trauma. The system holds us back. And then when you try to hold it accountable there’s nothing but denial... My life could have been so different if I had had a proper education like the other children. A lot of us are living lives that have been diminished. We’re not walking in our true potential. My life has been diminished by the struggle to overcome barriers that shouldn’t have been there in the first place, barriers that were put there because of racism. (Motune, 2023)

Noel’s narrative makes clear that he considers himself and others still to be living with trauma and that he considers his life diminished because of having been placed in an ESN school.

Haunting affects not only these adults’ presents and futures, but their children’s. This was something that Maisie Barrett identifies as she recognises that she did not spend

as much time with her children as she thinks she would have done if she had not been haunted by the need to prove that she is not educationally subnormal.

When I returned to a learning environment in my thirties, I couldn't work and study. Because I was made educationally subnormal, not only did I have a lot of catching up to do, but due to dyslexia, it took me a long time to process and retrieve information therefore for this reason I couldn't work and provide for my children's needs and being depressed did not help. Children need as a safe and nurturing home to imitate their siblings and parents, but I was single, depressed and was studying all the time and I couldn't nurture my children the way a mother should do. When I eventually went to university, my son began stealing mobile phones to buy clothes and went to prison. He told them in prison that he was depressed, so they gave him psychosis medication. The aftereffects of the medication gave him a lockjaw and before he came out of prison, he was addicted to the medication. For this reason, he has been in and out of mental health hospitals because when he stops taking the medication; he becomes mentally unwell. I blame the education system for deliberately handicapping my development when I was a child, which had a devastating effect on all areas of my life, especially motherhood. (Motune, 2023)

The narratives from the *Subnormal* documentary fit with increased recognition that histories of racism haunt the present and are both personal and sociostructural (Cain, 2015; Davis, 2005), disturbing the lives of their descendants and spurring them both to consciousness and calls for political action (Bradbury, 2020; Gordon, 2011; Phoenix, 2022).

The ways in which apparently historical events haunt the present is demonstrated by reactions to the airing of the *Subnormal* documentary. More Black people who had been miscategorised at school also came forward to make public their experiences. Rupert Nathaniel Primo wrote the following as part of a longer written feedback response on 26/05/2021 to seeing the documentary *Subnormal*.

Unfortunately racism and other stereotyping was common in the education system of the 60's and 70's. I was sent to a ESN school in the early 70's due to poor hand writing skills (I was made to sit on my dominant left hand) and poor ability when it came to reading (my teachers thought I was memorising the contents of my reading books!). My family and I didn't realise at the time that being black was also a factor behind the decision to have me ejected from main stream education.

I survived my ESN schooling but was left with long-term psychological scaring (stet) due to what I had experienced there.

Maybe the educational establishment and the government should be held accountable for these historic/herstoric (stet) wrong doings and more; as people are still suffering from the affects (stet) of being forced into these schools of non-learning.

I am one of the more fortunate survivors who was able to eventually go on to college then university and get the education I was denied in childhood, however there are many who did not due to the trauma they went through because of being labelled Educationally Sub Normal.

As with Noel and Maisie, Primo has also managed to get a degree, but his anger at the psychological scarring he identifies impelled him to want to hold the UK educational establishment to account. The negative impact of experiences such as those above are perhaps not surprising given that there is evidence from quantitative work that discrimination and negative positioning have emotional and mental health consequences (Nandi et al., 2020). As Avery Gordon (2011) suggests, haunting can produce spurs to consciousness and calls for political action (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015). This is evident in the fact that eight Black former pupils of SEN schools have grouped together to launch a legal action against the government to demand a formal apology and compensation for their lives being ruined. "Members of the group say they have struggled with a lack of self-worth and confidence... They told MPs about the lifelong impact of being classified as educationally subnormal" (Motune, 2023).

## Pervasive hauntings

It may seem that constructions of Black Caribbean children as intellectually deficient are only relevant to a minority who were sent to ESN schools. If so, is society really pervasively haunted by such ideas? It is, therefore, worth considering the accounts of Black Caribbean adults who went to mainstream schools and who are of the same generation as those discussed in the previous section, but whose achievements in UK society are well known. I have transcribed both extracts below from an autobiographical narrative programme called *Desert Island Discs* in which famous people are asked questions about their life story and select eight records to accompany their story. The first extract is from Diane Abbott, who was the first African Caribbean woman Member of Parliament in the UK<sup>1</sup>. This narrative

---

1 Diane Abbott has been suspended from the Labour Party by the leader, Keir Starmer, and so been an Independent Member of Parliament since she wrote a letter in response to a research publication saying "that Irish, Jewish and Traveller people "undoubtedly experience prejudice", but added: "This is similar to racism and the two words are often used as if they are interchangeable."

She added: "It is true that many types of white people with points of difference, such as redheads, can experience this prejudice. But they are not all their lives subject to racism." (Aubrey Allegretti, 23 April 2023), The Guardian Labour suspends Diane Abbott in attempt to stifle fresh antisemitism row | Diane Abbott | The Guardian).

Diane Abbott was suspended her more than a year ago on the grounds that what she said was anti-Semitic. Despite her apology for not expressing herself clearly, campaigns to have her reinstated and explanations that what she said was not anti-Semitic and that she has demonstrated that she is not anti-Semitic throughout her career, at the time of writing, Keir Starmer had not reinstated her.

starts by describing an incident during her first year at secondary school (aged eleven years) which was a girls' state grammar school where girls were selected because they were high achievers and had passed various exams, and where there were few black girls.

**Diane Abbott:** ...I was always good at... writing essays, and I was famous in my primary school for my essays. And I remember we were given an essay writing assignment, and at the second lesson she read out the marks. She started at the top and went down to the bottom. She started with A plus, A, A minus, and she still hadn't called my name. So I was a bit surprised because I never got less than an A in my primary school. And she read out everyone's names and everyone's grade and not my name. So I went up to her afterwards, and she had a desk, which was on a kind of dais, it was about, sort of, six inches above. And she picked up the essay with her thumb and her finger and she literally looked down on me and she said, 'Where did you copy this essay?' because she could not believe that this chubby, bespectacled black girl with her plaits in front of her could have written that essay. And I was mortified. And what happened, actually, and it's interesting because I think it... I think a lot of children react to low expectations like that. I--in my mind--I didn't go home and complain to my parents, you know, I just for the remainder, really, of that year wrote down, because I was frightened of being humiliated like that again. And it wasn't until my second year when I had an English teacher who really believed in me, that I was able to blossom again...

**Kirsty Young:** At what point in your schooling, then, did...your teachers think this girl is Oxbridge material?

**Diane Abbott:** They never thought that, actually. [Laughs] It was a girls' grammar school and there was a very strong culture of achievement, and so on, but I remember it was quite difficult to organise doing Oxford and Cambridge entrance from state schools in those days. And so when I went to my history teacher and told her that I wanted to do the Oxford and Cambridge entrance exam, she looked at me, she paused, and she said, "I don't think you're up to it." And then I said something, which really was absolutely fateful, but I looked at her and I said, without skipping a beat, 'But I do and that's what matters.' Now no-one I knew had stayed at school past 16, let alone Oxford and Cambridge, but I just got the idea in my head that I was going to go there, and nobody told me that working class girls, let alone black working class girls, didn't go to Oxford or Cambridge. I didn't know. So I went for it. (Diane Abbott on *Desert Island Discs*, Radio 4, 18 May 2008)

The relevance of Diane Abbott's account to thinking about hauntology and its effects is that she faced taken-for-granted assumptions that she as a Black child could not achieve

excellence (both from an English teacher at 11 years and a history teacher in the sixth form). This was despite the fact that she had passed the entrance exams. As with Maisie and Noel, above, Diane Abbott said that she felt humiliation, feared being humiliated again and so deliberately produced work of a lower level. However, unlike them, she was championed by a teacher in her second year and by the time she had decided that she wanted to go to Cambridge University (which she did), opposes the limitation her history teacher tries to set for her.

The second example comes from Malorie Blackman, who has won many awards and prizes as a novelist for children and adults. Some of her novels have been televised and she was selected as the UK Children's Laureate (2013-5). The example comes from when she was in the sixth form.

**Kirsty Young:** So tell me Malorie Blackman, this teacher-- careers teacher-- she said to you Black people don't become teachers?

**Malorie Blackman:** Indeed yes. She was one who had to write all the university references and so she said to me 'Well OK Malorie, what do you want to do?' And I'd had it all worked out from the time I was 7-8, I wanted to be an English teacher. I wanted to teach English and impart—I love an enthusiasm for English texts and I said 'I want to go to Goldsmiths College I want to do an English and drama degree and then I want to be a teacher at the end of it'. And she just looked me in the eye and said 'Well Black people don't become teachers'. She said 'Well why don't you be a secretary instead?' And I looked at her. I said 'I don't wanna be a secretary. I want to be an English teacher'. I mean no disrespect to secretaries and then she said 'Well' she said 'I'm sorry I'm not giving you a reference for that' and she said um, 'Besides I don't think you're gonna get your English A'level', which was nonsense 'cause I've never failed an English exam in my life and so I remember looking at looking at her and thinking I'll show you old cow and if anything actually it made me work harder. But then she said 'I'll tell you what. I'll give you a reference to go to do business studies at Poly'. And because that's the only thing she would give me a reference for as far as higher education is concerned, that's what I ended up doing.

**Kirsty Young:** How do you look back on it now?

**Malorie Blackman:** For years, for about three to four years, I wasted my life hating her 'cause I thought she'd ruined my life. I look back at it now and if I met her, I would thank her. She did me a favour because she taught me that if somebody stands in the way of what you really really want to do you don't



stand there arguing with them and you certainly don't let them stop you what you do is you find a way to go around them.

**(Malorie Blackman on *Desert Island Discs*, Radio 4, 22 Nov 2013)**

From her account, Malorie Blackman was also haunted by limited expectations of her intellectual capacity. However, the story she tells is not one of shame and humiliation, but anger and immediate determination to resist, even though, for some years, she does do what the careers teacher suggested she should. Her narrative also indicates that her emotional resistance is hating, which she retrospectively considers ineffectual.

### ***Accounting for selves and others: Living racialised psychosocial hauntologies***

For all of the people cited above, the ways in which racialised haunting impacts on their presents and futures is psychosocial, producing personal affective reactions (Zembylas, 2022) that continue to be strongly felt in adulthood, replaying painful “encounters of racism... and pain that flood back not as memories but as fresh visceral and painful moments” (Peterson, 2019b, p. 356). Those hauntings are not only affective, but systemic, being part of the schools in which they spend their time and societal. For Diane Abbott and Malorie Blackman, there is no suggestion that the whole institution treated them in the way identified in the episodes they select, whereas for Maisie and Noel, it is the system they identify rather than individual episodes. As Sylvia Wynter (2006) suggests, white and Black people are subject to the same systemic racialised ideologies, but the power relations involved yield vastly different experiences.

For all the people quoted above, the haunting is implicit and unnamed until later in their lives, highlighting the importance of recognising dynamism and the importance of temporality (Phoenix, 2023; Sherwood, 2001). However, as Avery Gordon (2011) suggests, when haunting becomes open to conscious scrutiny, resistance becomes possible. For those who were miscategorised as educationally subnormal, Lyttanya Shannon's film acted as a catalyst, producing solidarity and collective resistance. Their recurrent accounts are that their lives have been ruined by their early experiences during the 1960s and 70s. “The consequences have lasted a lifetime, blighting their confidence, self-esteem and life chances” (Weale, 2023). Their subjectification as ‘subnormal’ has thus, as Butler (2004) suggests, also constructed them as agents who are collectively resisting their subjectification and racialised oppression. In keeping with Peterson's (2019b, p. 347) engagement with narratives of apartheid, their “intent was not simply to bear witness to oppression and exploitation but also to do so in a manner equally concerned with the limits and possibilities of undertaking archival and memory-work that is recuperative and reparative”.

The examples above are intersectional in that it is not only that the children involved are black, but that they were migrants from the Caribbean whose socioeconomic status

was such that their parents did not know the English educational system and trusted that teachers and the system had their children's best interests at heart. Many Black Caribbean parents whose children were sent to ESN schools, believed that these were called 'special' because they were giving their children the best possible education, rather than none. For middle class Caribbean migrants whose parents had degrees, this would not have been an issue (Rollock et al., 2014). Intersectionality also alerts us to the difference, but relevance, of these issues for white pupils.

Overall, the examples above illustrate the importance of telling stories that are not generally known (Peterson, 2019a, b). They give a small insight into the ways in which histories of racism haunt the present and are as personal as they are sociostructural (Cain, 2015; Davis, 2005), producing intergenerational costs and potentially spurring those affected to consciousness and calls for political action. The responses of Black adults who had erroneously been classified as 'educationally subnormal' to the screening of the documentary *Subnormal* provides a snapshot of how racialised hauntings can erupt in the present, rather than remaining a melancholic and unnamed presence. This was very evident in the resurgence of Black Lives Matter following the US murder of George Floyd. Engaging with narratives such as those above can thus be part of a process of humanising those who, as Sylvia Wynter (2006) points out, have been continually excluded from the category human – a theme with which Peterson (2019a) was much concerned. In keeping with what Peterson advocates, the above paper helps to historicise and add meaning to melancholic presences, showing that they are not simply recent aberrations. It does, however, remain the case that, in Peterson's (2019b, p. 360) own words, "the lure and choice between beneficent and malignant practices and ideas is one that will require a profound and continuous thinking-through of praxis".

## References

- Bebber, B. (2015). "We were just unwanted": Bussing, migrant dispersal, and South Asians in London. *Journal of Social History*, 48(3), 635–661.
- Bhambra, G. K. (2023). *Rethinking modernity: Postcolonialism and the sociological imagination*. 2nd edition. Springer Nature..
- Bradbury, J. (2020) *Narrative psychology and Vygotsky in dialogue: Changing subjects*. Routledge.
- Burman, E. (2019). Child as method: Implications for decolonising educational research. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 28(1), 4–26.
- Burman, E. (2022). Found childhood as a practice of child as method. *Children's Geographies*, 20(3), 271–283.

- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. Routledge.
- Cain, A. (2015). Slavery and memory in the Netherlands: Who needs commemoration? *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage*, 4(3), 227–242.
- Chevannes, M., & Reeves, F. (1987). Racial Inequality in Education. In Barry Troyna (Ed.), *Racial inequality in education* (pp. 147–169). Routledge.
- Coard, B. (1971). How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System: The Scandal of the Black Child in Schools in Britain. New Beacon Books.
- Davis, C. (2005). Hauntology, spectres and phantoms. *French Studies*, 59(3), 373–379.
- Davis, C. (2013). Etat Present: Hauntology, spectres and phantoms In M. del Pilar Blanco & E. Peeren (Eds). *Spectres and Phantoms. The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, (53-60) Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Derrida, J. (2012). *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*. Routledge.
- Dhondy, F., Beese, B., & Hassan, L. (1982). *The black explosion in British schools*. Race Today. Race Today Collective.
- Esteves, O. (2018). Babylon by Bus? The dispersal of immigrant children in England, race and urban space (1960s–1980s). *Paedagogica Historica*, 54(6), 750–765.
- Faulkner, W. (2023). *Requiem for a Nun*. Double 9 Books.
- Fivush, R. (2019). *Family narratives and the development of an autobiographical self: Social and cultural perspectives on autobiographical memory*. Routledge.
- Freeman, M. (2010). *Hindsight: The promise and peril of looking backward*. Oxford University Press.
- Frosh, S. (2013). *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and ghostly transmissions*. Springer.
- Gillborn, D. (2008). *Racism and education: Coincidence or conspiracy?* Routledge.
- Gordon, A. (2011). Some thoughts on haunting and futurity. *Borderlands*, 10(2), 1–21.

- Gordon, A. F. (2008). *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Greenfeld, D., Reupert, A., & Jacobs, N. (2023). Living alongside past trauma: Lived experiences of Australian grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. *Family Relations*, 72(3), 876–890.
- Killian, L. (1979). School busing in Britain: Policies and perceptions. *Harvard Educational Review*, 49(2), 185–206.
- Kulig-Reid, Adrienne & O’Hare, Dan. (2023). ‘Subnormal’: Time the educational psychology profession apologised? <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/subnormal-time-educational-psychology-profession-apologised>”<https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/subnormal-time-educational-psychology-profession-apologised>
- Layton, L. (2019). Transgenerational hauntings: Toward a social psychoanalysis and an ethic of dis-illusionment. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 29(2), 105–121.
- Lincoln, M., & Lincoln, B. (2015). Toward a critical hauntology: Bare afterlife and the ghosts of Ba Chúc. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57(1), 191–220.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the coloniality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept. *Cultural studies*, 21(2-3), 240-270.
- Meghji, A. (2021). *Decolonizing sociology: An introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Migheli, G. (2022). Specters of specters of Marx: A ghost that was named Derrida. *Ephemeris*, 22(3), 275–285.
- Motune, V. (2023, April 5). The lasting trauma of ‘subnormal’ schools ESN survivors who were labelled ‘backwards’ are stepping up and taking the government to court. The Voice Newspaper. <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/news/education/2023/04/05/the-lasting-trauma-of-subnormal-schools/>”<https://www.voice-online.co.uk/news/education/2023/04/05/the-lasting-trauma-of-subnormal-schools/>
- Nicholson, R. (2021, May 20). Subnormal: A British Scandal review – the racist nightmare that scarred black children for life. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/may/20/subnormal-a-british-scandal-review-racist-nightmare-steve-mcqueen>”<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/may/20/subnormal-a-british-scandal-review-racist-nightmare-steve-mcqueen>

- Peterson, B. (2002). The archives and the political imaginary. In C. Hamilton (Ed.). *Refiguring the archive* (pp. 29–37). Springer.
- Peterson, B. (2019a). The art of personhood: Kinship and its social challenges. In J. Oguide, *The Art of Personhood. Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community* (pp. 73 – 97). Indiana University Press.
- Peterson, B. (2019b). Spectrality and inter-generational black narratives in South Africa. *Social Dynamics*, 45(3), 345–364.
- Rollock, N., Gillborn, D., Vincent, C., & Ball, S. J. (2014). *The colour of class: The educational strategies of the Black middle classes*. Routledge.
- Sharpe, C. (2014). Black studies: In the wake. *The Black Scholar*, 44(2), 59–69.
- Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press.
- Sherwood, M. (2001). Race, Empire and Education: Teaching Racism. *Race & Class*, 42(3), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396801423001>”<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396801423001>
- Weale, Sally. (2023, February 2). Black people who were labelled ‘backward’ as children seek justice for lifelong trauma. *The Guardian*. Black people who were labelled ‘backward’ as children seek justice for lifelong trauma
- Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3(3), 257–337.
- Wynter, S. (2006). Proud Flesh Inter/Views. ProudFlesh: A New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics & Consciousness, <http://www.proudfleshjournal.com/issue4/wynter.html> Wynter, S. (2016). *No humans involved*. Moor’s Head Press.
- Zembylas, M. (2022). Sylvia Wynter, racialized affects, and minor feelings: Unsettling the coloniality of the affects in curriculum and pedagogy. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 54(3), 336–350.