

## **Uncanny Returns**

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### **I.**

**Forthcoming in "Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices." (eds) Raquel Romberg, Andea Nehring, Brill.**

Liberal modern personhood presumes a coherent, indivisible subject. Yet there is plentiful evidence to suggest that selfhood in modern times is often experienced as inchoate: as split, doubled, even overtaken by the haunting presence of intimate others, benevolent or benign. Steeling the individual against instability and fracture has been the enduring task of the grand normalizing institutions of public care and correction, of schools, hospitals, prisons. It has also been the mandate of the more intimate, domestic processes that cultivate the "second nature" of affective individualism (Elias 1939; Foucault 1978). Salient, too, has been the privatization of religion, its focus on an ever more personalized notion of faith and salvation in an otherwise dispirited world.

But for all this, the reach and specification of liberal modern personhood has always been uneven, both at the margins of European society and in its heartlands. This has not merely been a matter of an inequality of civil rights, self-determination, or the value of human worth along the lines of gender, class, age, or religion. At base, the cogency of individual personhood has always been haunted by what it is not: by various "standardized nightmares" (Wilson 1951), be it of the *doppelganger*, the zombie, the schizophrenic. Or by multiple personality," which Ian Hacking (1991:844) once referred

to as an accepted “way to be crazy” in “industrial/romantic, Protestant society.” Foundational social theorists have also questioned the centrality of the autonomous, self-generating subject in Western liberal visions of modernity. Durkheim (2005:36) famously argued for an idea of *Homo Duplex*: “far from us being straightforward,” he wrote, “our internal life has something like a double centre of gravity. On the one hand there is our individuality, and, more especially, our body that is its foundation; on the other, everything that, within us, expresses something other than ourselves.” For Durkheim, this other was society, something transcendent, affective, sacred. While he located his most detailed examples of this dynamic in nonwestern society, his model was generic to all collective being -- not least to Western industrial society which, rather than being secular, was founded on a new religion he called the “cult of the individual” (Durkheim 1995:215–216, 429–430).

Freud (1919) was no less concerned with the dividedness of human experience, although his vision was, in the first instance, intrapsychic. Of relevance to my concerns here is his writing on the cultural dynamics of personhood, the class of “obtuse” experiences concerning the “doubling, dividing, and interchanging self” he termed the *unheimlich* or uncanny. Less a pathological state than an instantly recognizable presentiment of unpleasantness and eeriness, it connotes a feeling of not knowing where one is, as it were. The language of location is telling here, for Freud saw the “uncanny” as a fold in time; a kind of evolutionary holdover. The *unheimlich* is not so much a form of modern magic (*a la* Durkheim) than the return of things that have been defamiliarized, repressed by the logic of civilization. As such, it offers an estranged recognition (Clery 1995) of a more primitive state of being.

To be sure, his treatise on the uncanny is itself uncomfortable -- he makes plain his dis-ease with the grab bag of things that that seem to inspire this “creeping” sense of dread, this clutch of phenomena at once familiar and alien, less easy to name than to associate with a shared ‘structure of feeling’(1919:1). Raymond Williams (1977:133) famously deployed “structure of feeling” in a more avowedly *intersubjective* sense, to mean “affective elements of consciousness and relationships...thought as felt and feeling as thought.” For him, this was “social experience which is still in process,” often not yet aware of itself as social. His usage here seems apt in capturing the quality of haunted happenings at stake in my story. It also serves as bridge between Freud and Durkheim: where Freud explained such mysteries as psycho-cultural regression, Durkheim might see them as inherent in the moral dimension of social being.

How effective, then, is the idea of the uncanny in accounting for the continuing presence of the enchanted and the esoteric in our own, late modern times? I seek to pursue this question by revisiting a particular South African case, a postcolonial ghost story, if you will. It concerns the return from the dead of a renowned popular musician, who goes back to his rural home in KwaZulu-Natal to recover his voice and reclaim his fame and fortune.<sup>1</sup> The events are set in what is commonly glossed as a “plural” social and cultural setting, a context in which the subjects and objects of the liberal and the modern coexist with what might appear to be more traditional, enchanted beliefs. But is the spookiness at the heart of my tale merely a reflex of an autochthonous past or does it signal something more complex about the current world in general?

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<sup>1</sup> For another treatment of this case, developed in relation to a different set of questions, see Comaroff and Comaroff (2016).

Avery Gordon (2008) has argued persuasively that haunting is less an engagement with the past than a “contest over the future, over what is to come next.” The musician who returned from the dead, we shall see, was intently focused on what came next. But who was he? Revenant, wraith, or impostor? Who is qualified to explain his all-too-worldly desires? In probing these questions, we find ourselves moving beyond a pluralist social and cultural frame to confront an even larger issue: are we all, everywhere, in some way “postcolonial” now, all struggling to make sense of “what comes next” in a world at once familiar and strange; in an uneasy present -- a mélange of old and new, the modern and something other?

## II.

In late December 2009, one of South Africa’s legendary Zulu musicians passed away quite suddenly. Like a troubadour, one soulful reporter noted, “he died at the side of the road”<sup>2</sup> – in this case, the main highway between Johannesburg and his home in Nqutu, in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Some said he died of AIDS. But others claimed that he was the victim of the occult ill-will of a rival artist.<sup>3</sup> The doubling of the protagonist’s persona

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<sup>2</sup> “Lazarus Rising: Strange Case of the Two uMgqumenis,” Sihle Mthembu, *Mail & Guardian*, 26 January 2018; <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-01-26-00-lazarus-rising-strange-case-of-the-two-umgqumenis/>, accessed 29 August 2023.

<sup>3</sup> “Four Wives Split over Man Posing as Late Singer,” Slindile Maluleka, *Daily News/Pressreader*, 17 February 2012; <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/daily-news-south-africa/20120217/281736971365711>, accessed 6 May 2015.

haunts his story from the start. In the copious media coverage of the case, he is referred to by one of two different names: Khulekani Kwakhe Khumalo, which follows the convention of identifying a man with reference to his father's clan, or as Khulekani Kwakhe Mseleku, the son of his maternal lineage. Salient to the unfolding drama is the fact that Khulekani was raised by his matrikin, who insist that the bridewealth that would have legitimated his parents' union -- and made him a Khumalo -- had never been paid. This was disputed by his patrikin, who would seek to lay claim to his heritage. To most Black South Africans, however, he was known as "Mgqumeni," his moniker as a *maskandi*, a singer-songwriter of *maskanda*, a Zulu crossover genre that mixes traditional praise poetry with popular urban musical forms.

*Maskandi* give voice to the experience of life and work in modern times, above all, to the migrant journey made by young rural men to cities in search of a livelihood (Olsen 2009). The singers are held to draw inspiration from their ancestors; Mgqumeni attributed his gift to his mother's brother, Mahawukela, a popular musician who had toured with the legendary *maskanda* crew of *Izingane Zoma*,<sup>4</sup> although what set the young singer apart was his own, markedly distinctive style. Mgqumeni's songs were strongly autobiographical, dwelling on loss, exploitation, and longing, all intoned in a keening, high pitched voice that connected with the mood of his adoring followers.<sup>5</sup> Like U.S. rap musicians, *maskandi* are intensely competitive. Khulekani had a notoriously bitter rivalry with another celebrity in the genre, Mtshengiseni "Indidane" Gcwensa, and

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<sup>4</sup> "Lazarus Rising: Strange Case of the Two uMgqumenis."

<sup>5</sup> "Lazarus Rising: Strange Case of the Two uMgqumenis."

in some of his mature, uncannily prophetic songs, speculated on Gcwensa's efforts to bewitch him.

Mgqumeni was buried with due ceremony amidst national lament in 2010, his funeral attended by high profile politicians, artists, and media celebrities. But in late January, 2012 he returned home to Nqutu, to the home of his of his paternal kin, the Khumalos, rather than to the Mselekus, the maternal kin among whom he was raised. A sudden announcement that same day on a popular local radio station, *Ukhozi FM* informed listeners that they were about to be treated to an interview with a person who claimed he was Mgqumeni, risen from the dead. "I never actually died," the man explained. "I was actually held hostage by zombies."<sup>6</sup> The announcement went viral on social media, which reported that the singer's paternal family were in a state of shock and delight. Surprised, too, were Mgqumeni's four common law wives, polygamy being a recognized cultural practice under South African law. *Ukhosi FM* reported that the returnee would be "shown to the public for the first time" on February 5, at his father's compound in Nqutu.<sup>7</sup>

The "return" of Khumalo was a seismic event. An avalanche of fans -- some estimated that the crowd was 30,000 strong -- descended on the modest homestead from across southern Africa. The media reported that police in riot trucks resorted to the

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<sup>6</sup> "Lazarus Rising: Strange Case of the Two uMgqumenis."

<sup>7</sup> "Fans Flock to Home of 'Resurrected' Musician," Canaan Mdletshe, *Times Live*, 6 February 2012; <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2012-02-06-fans-flock-to-home-of-resurrected-musician/>, accessed 15 April 2015.

use of a water cannon in the effort to manage the “frenzy” and “hysteria” of the crowd as they struggled to catch a glimpse of their resurrected idol.<sup>8</sup> When, finally, he appeared, a woman shouted ‘*Hhuye!*’ (It’s him) and the audience went wild.<sup>9</sup> “I am Mgqumeni,” he declared, speaking into a loudspeaker from the turret of a police vehicle and evoking a thunderous cheer. “I know that some of you might not believe, but yes, it’s true — it’s me.”<sup>10</sup> He went on to say that he had been held captive by occult means, turned into an *umkhovu*, a zombie, or witch’s accomplice, and made to toil endlessly on a diet of mud. He had eventually managed to escape, and made his way home to his kin. “My face has changed because of the lifestyle I was living,”<sup>11</sup> he said. The Khumalo family elders told reporters that they were very unhappy about the condition he was in, using this to explain why, despite requests from the crowd, the prodigal refused to sing. He soon would, however; and in the meantime, he recited the clan names of his father’s people, affirming his patrilineal heritage in traditional Zulu idiom.

What was it that drew thousands of people to the deep outback of KwaZulu-Natal, across the often-treacherous roads of this dramatic mountainous landscape? South African commentators were fascinated by the feverish expectation of the

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<sup>8</sup> “Maskandi Artist Back from the Dead,” Bongani Mthethwa, *Sunday World*, 5 February 2012; [www.sundayworld.co.za/news/2012/02/05/maskandi-artist-back-from-the-dead](http://www.sundayworld.co.za/news/2012/02/05/maskandi-artist-back-from-the-dead), accessed 6 July 2012.

<sup>9</sup> “Lazarus Rising: Strange Case of the Two uMgqumenis.”

<sup>10</sup> “There is a Frenzy among Masikhandi Fans Following the Mysterious Return of Mgqumeni.” *YouTube SABC*, 5 February 2012; [https://www.google.com/search?q=Mgumeni%2C+maskandi+artist+back+from+the+dead+youtube+video&sca\\_esv=567351978&rlz=1C1GCEB\\_enUS991US991&sxsrf=AM9HkKIN75fxDLs1-1-9](https://www.google.com/search?q=Mgumeni%2C+maskandi+artist+back+from+the+dead+youtube+video&sca_esv=567351978&rlz=1C1GCEB_enUS991US991&sxsrf=AM9HkKIN75fxDLs1-1-9), accessed 5 June 2023.

<sup>11</sup> “Lazarus Rising: Strange Case of the Two uMgqumenis.”

multitude, which seemed entranced by the possibility that the charismatic singer might walk among them once more. Some observers sought to play down the exotic elements of the story. This was less a matter of the credulity of “traditional” Africa, wrote Adli Jacobs, than a universal fascination with the idea of reincarnation; the belief that “*Elvis Presley* ha[d] not yet left the building.” A “yearning for the return,” he said, “sits deep in our collective psyche.”<sup>12</sup> Freud (1919:17), recall, argued that a *locus classicus* of a feeling of uncanniness was the supposed occurrence in real time of things we no longer believe in – like the appearance of the dead “before our eyes on the scene of their former activities.” The creepiness that descends on us, he suggested, prompts the impetus to “test reality” in the face of the possibility that the “magical” could be true; like the dispassionate young woman, a teacher, with whom I spoke in Mqumeni’s home village in 2015, who became animated when I mentioned his name. “It all happened right here” she declared. “Many of us believe that he really could have returned. After all, such things can happen. We have seen it in the Bible.”

But many were skeptical. “Con artist or modern-day Lazarus?” mused a primetime TV commentator.<sup>13</sup> While a large number of fans seemed persuaded that they were witnessing a miraculous resurrection, others scrutinized the body of the born-again bard more suspiciously. The man before them lacked his trademark dreadlocks, they protested. He had had lost a substantial amount of weight and sported an

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<sup>12</sup> “Elvis is Still in the Building: The Return of Mqumeni Khumalo and the Difficulty we have in Letting Go,” Adli Jacobs, *Medium*, 4 January 2015; <https://medium.com/@adlijacobs/elvis-is-still-in-the-building-ff8400d644de>, accessed 26 August 2023.

<sup>13</sup> “There is a Frenzy among Masikhandi Fans Following the Mysterious Return of Mqumeni.”



unfamiliar gold tooth.<sup>14</sup> In the days following his return, the media stoked intense speculation about who the returnee really was. His brief appearance on local radio had sparked a flurry of calls questioning the unfamiliar tone of his voice and the faster pace of his speech.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, his kin became quite sharply divided on the matter of his identity. While spokesmen for the Khumalos claimed to have recognized him instantly, a maternal kinsman, Bongani Mncube, called the prodigal a “well-rehearsed criminal.” He himself had grown up with Mqgumeni among the Mselekus, he insisted, and knew him like the “palm of [his own] hand.” He vowed that he would “go to the highest court in the land” to prove that this man was a fraud. “We [i.e. the matrikin] are not prepared to accept him. If he thinks he can fool us he is messing around with the wrong people.”<sup>16</sup>

Those who were best able to verify the singer’s identity, presumably, were his four conjugal partners. It was they, surely, who knew him most intimately, body and soul. Surprisingly, these women were divided, split 2-2. Like others who claimed privileged familiarity with Mqgumeni’s person, they invoked putatively distinctive physical features, albeit in strikingly different ways. But clearly, identification in such situations is less a matter of unmediated recognition than of a perception prefigured by affect, politics, and cultural expectation. And so, when the singer appeared in the local

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<sup>14</sup> “‘Back from the Dead’ Musician in Custody,” Mlondi Radebe, *News24*, 6 February 2012; <https://www.news24.com/news24/back-from-dead-musician-in-custody-20120>, accessed 5 October 2023.

<sup>15</sup> “It’s Him - Wife of ‘Resurrected’ Singer,” *IOL*, 5 February 2012; <https://www.iol.co.za/entertainment/music/its-him-wife-of-resurrected-singer-1227451>, accessed 3 February 2016.

<sup>16</sup> “Fans flock to Home of ‘Resurrected’ Musician.” Mlondi Radebe, *News24*; <https://www.news24.com/news24/back-from-dead-musician-in-custody-20120206>. Accessed 4 October 2023.

magistrate's court a couple of weeks later, charged with fraud and perjury, two of his wives, Nomkhosi Mbatha and Zehlile Nozipho Xulu, insisted that he was not whom he claimed to be. They said that, when they had heard he was alive, they set off immediately to see him, only to discover that his scars and marks were different from the ones they had known. "We looked at his hands, especially the thumbs, and the feet, but were not able to recognize any of the features on [him] that Mgqumeni had," Xulu explained.<sup>17</sup> She added that her son had traveled all the way from Johannesburg with the hope of seeing his father, only to find that the man was a "hooligan." She added: "I was annoyed when he repeatedly referred to me as his lover."

But the singer's other two wives, Nonlanhla Majola and Lamulile Ngema, testified otherwise. They were convinced, on close inspection, that their husband had actually returned. Majola, with whom Mgqumeni had lived for a time in Johannesburg, said that she first thought that the returnee was a "bad spirit." But once she had "check[ed] his feet, neck and smile,"<sup>18</sup> she was persuaded, firmly denouncing all evidence to the contrary. "I know this is the father of my child,"<sup>19</sup> she declared. Her daughter Amanda added that her father had immediately recognized her, calling her by name.

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<sup>17</sup> Four Wives Split over Man Posing as Late Singer."

<sup>18</sup> "Maskandi Artist Back from 'the Dead.'"

<sup>19</sup> "I Know This is the Father of my Child – Mgqumeni's Lady," Canaan Mdletshe, *The Sowetan*, 8 February 2012; [www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2012/02/08/i-know-this-is-the-father-my-child-mgqumeni-slady](http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2012/02/08/i-know-this-is-the-father-my-child-mgqumeni-slady), accessed 10 July 2012. According to the *Daily Sun*, a former fiancée, Thembi Ntombela, also confirmed that the returnee was genuine. "I have checked Mgqumeni and found an old bullet wound on his back. This proves it's him," she said, adding that she had also looked at his arms, hands, and legs for confirmation; "This Zombie is a Fake!," Muzi Zincume and Anil Singh, *Daily Sun*, 6 February 2012, pp.1-2.

A parenthesis here: the passionate claims and counterclaims of kin and confidantes in this case recall a story of another such strange return. This one took place in the US in the 1990s, after the mysterious disappearance of teenager Nicholas Patrick Barclay from his Texas home. The case was born of a bizarre mix of accident, police incompetence, and ingenious duplicity that enabled a 23-year-old, dark-haired French-Algerian, Frédéric Bourdin, to pass himself off as the hapless 16-year-old blonde, blue-eyed American some three years later.<sup>20</sup> Bourdin, an inveterate trickster, was the subject of an intriguing true-crime documentary, *Imposture*,<sup>21</sup> which showed how Barclay's mother and close kin insisted – in the face of all physical evidence -- that Bourdin was their son. They, too, held fast to their faith in the face of growing suspicions among the wider community, suspicions that eventually led to the outing of the pretender. Here, again, we encounter what critics described as the “creepiness”<sup>22</sup> at the heart of an “intimate duplicity,” a kind of doubling in which would-be kin are predisposed to disavow the strangeness of the familiar.

As time wore on, the kin of the man who returned to Nqutu became increasingly vehement in their disagreement over his identity. The initial suspicions of the Mselekus soon congealed into a cogent narrative -- the man, they said, was a pretender, part of a

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<sup>20</sup> “Missing Child Seems Found, But His Family Is at a Loss,” Jeannette Catsoulis , Movie Review, *The New York Times*, 12 July 2012; <http://movies.nytimes.com/2012/07/13/movies/the-imposter-about-thecon-artist-frederic-bourdin.html>, accessed 30 July 2012.

<sup>21</sup> “*The Impostor* (2012) Film,” *Wikipedia*; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Impostor\\_\(2012\\_film\)#:~:text=The%20Imposter%20is%20a%202012,age%20of%2013%20in%201994](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Impostor_(2012_film)#:~:text=The%20Imposter%20is%20a%202012,age%20of%2013%20in%201994), accessed 12 December 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Note here the critics account, “*The Impostor* (2012) Film,”

criminal conspiracy to lay claim to the dead singer's assets. Mgqumeni had left no will, and rumors abounded about his sizable estate,<sup>23</sup> especially about unpaid royalties on albums that went multiplatinum – sometimes several in a single year. We should note, here, that the historic exploitation of black recording artists by studio impresarios in South Africa stokes public suspicions of vast sequestered wealth.

The Khumalos, for their part, continued to insist that their son had returned. They pointed to the fact that the Mselekus had refused to let them see his body before he was buried, an established mortuary practice in the region. This fed the suspicion that his mother's clan were up to no good.<sup>24</sup> The Mselekus, convinced that their rivals were plotting to declare themselves the singer's rightful heirs, duly laid a charge of fraud against him with the police in Nqutu.

The interplay of passion, patrimony, and personhood in the story of Mgqumeni's return recalls yet another, perhaps *the* iconic case: *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Davis 1983). This drama, which took place in a peasant village in the Pyrenees in the sixteenth-century, has captured imaginations over the centuries since then. This is not surprising. It highlights conundrums intrinsic to the modernist conception of personhood, to the idea of the authentic, self-possessed individual as a social and legal figure. Like the Barclay case, and the return of Mgqumeni, it centers on a mystery, a feat that erased the line between legitimate self-fashioning and deception. Yet again, a

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<sup>23</sup> "South African 'Back-from-Dead Singer Mgqumeni' Detained," BBC News, 6 February 2012; [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16905521](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16905521), accessed 6 July 2012.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. "Family Split Over Maskandi Artists Claim," Siindile Maluleka, *Daily News*, 8 February 2012; [www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/families-split-over-maskandi-artist-claim-1.1229827](http://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/families-split-over-maskandi-artist-claim-1.1229827), accessed 8 July 2012.

two-faced stranger was able to usurp the persona of another and maintain the con -- in this case, for a couple of years -- in an intimate, face-to-face setting.

At the age of 24, Guerre, who had been accused of theft, left the village to join the war in Spain, leaving his wife, child, and kin. Nearly a decade later, a man turned up, claiming to be the absconder. Somewhat like the latter in looks, this in a context lacking portraits or photographs, the pretender displayed what seemed like a native command of local knowledge; so much so, that he was able to live for three years with Guerre's deserted wife -- until his efforts to lay claim to the family estate raised suspicions in a rival kinsman. In the upshot, the interloper was charged with impersonating Guerre, stealing his inheritance, and seducing his wife. The village itself was divided on the matter, some believing that the man was an imposter, others swearing that he was the real Martin Guerre. Local officers of the law struggled to determine the rights of the case, until the 'real' Guerre returned from the war. In the wake of his reappearance, the imposter was finally outed and hanged. Counterfeit, forgery, and rape were capital offences at the time.

Perhaps the most intriguing enigma that has haunted these events ever since is the one that troubled Mgqumeni's return as well: how could a fraudulent stranger sustain his credibility in everyday interaction with intimate others -- like parents or a spouse? In her controversial analysis of the case of Martin Guerre, Davis (1983) suggests that the fiction was staged as a *folie a deux*, the wife collaborating with the impostor to serve personal interests of her own. As in the case of Nicholas Barclay, it seems, the pretenders can sometimes play their assumed roles more effectively than did the originals. And who has not wished at some point that a lost loved-one might

return from the dead, to resume their place among the living? These stories also underline how collaborative is the social production of self and personhood -- always, everywhere.

In the case of the return of Mgqumeni, too, the law would struggle for several years to solve the mystery, if it ever did. When the singer's matrikin charged him with fraud the police arrested him and subjected him to fingerprinting. He was duly identified as one Sibusiso John Gcabashe, this taken to be the most plausible of *five* possible identities in the police records. Fingerprinting remains a matter of expert judgment; it cannot settle questions of identity with total certainty. In the context of uneven record keeping, as in South Africa, its diagnostic efficacy is even more suspect (Cole 2002). But fingerprint archives also presume discrete individual identities. Gcabashe, it turns out, had reinvented himself several times before. His brother attested that he once was caught trying to stow away on a ship traveling abroad, and on another occasion, on an interstate bus.<sup>25</sup> Like Mgqumeni, he was originally from rural KZN, but he was also wanted in the province on prior charges of abduction, rape, and theft. To this day, however, he refuses to answer to any name but Mgqumeni, consistently denying all charges levelled at the person called Gcabashe. The Khumalos, in the meantime, slaughtered a cow to "welcome their son back to the community" and to reconcile him with the ancestors.<sup>26</sup> They also sold additional stock to hire him a lawyer.

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<sup>25</sup> "No Way Is He Mgqumeni," Slindile Maluleka, *Daily News*, 14 March 2012; [www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/no-way-is-he-mgqumeni-1.1256076](http://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/no-way-is-he-mgqumeni-1.1256076), accessed 1 August 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Frank Khumalo, personal communication.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the magistrate in Nqutu, originally entrusted with the case, made little headway in managing the prosecution. After all, it was unclear even how to establish the identity of the defendant, let alone to determine what charges should be brought against him. The accused took to protesting that zombies were persecuting him in his cell.<sup>27</sup> He also called repeatedly for DNA tests to be conducted to establish his identity, although this option seems never to have been seriously considered, possibly because DNA technology was unavailable to local courts. The Mselekus added to the mix by complaining that they were receiving anonymous death threats and demands that they drop their suit.

Three months later, the proceedings were moved to a regional court in nearby Vryheid, where they were open to the public. Court appearances of the man-in-question immediately became significant social events, with “fans” flocking to see whether the man was an imposter or the real thing.<sup>28</sup> For his part, the prisoner ignored all communications addressed to Gcabashe. He informed the assembled crowds that he was now playing his guitar again in his cell, a fact to which his jailers readily attested. In fact, in May, 2012, a new 12-track album was released with a picture of Gcabashe on the cover. Provocatively entitled *Senadlimali YamaNthungwa*, “You have embezzled the money for the Mntungwas” -- a clan name for the Khumalos -- it was reported to be selling like hot cakes on the streets of Johannesburg. The owner of a prominent record

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<sup>27</sup> “‘Haunted’ Gcabashe Seeks Traditional Healing for his Visions from the Other Side,” Mondli Radebe, *The Witness*, 17 October 2012; <https://www.citizen.co.za/witness/archive/haunted-gcabashe-seeks-traditional-healing-for-his-visions-from-the-other-side-20150430/>, accessed 13 October 2023.

<sup>28</sup> “Maskandi Man ‘Impersonator’ Back in Court Again,” *New24*; 18 June 2012, <https://www.news24.com/news24/maskandi-man-impersonator-in-court-again-20150429>, accessed 24 August 2023.

company claimed that the album was an exact copy of one recently put out by the gifted *maskanda* group, *Amambula*. This was not a random choice: the group was said to sound “almost like the late Mqumeni.”<sup>29</sup> The vendors had “taken an original CD and put on a picture of Gcabashe,” the impresario went on, “now it is something else altogether.” There is a brazen double-fakery in play in all this, the producers cashing in, quite literally, on the audacity of the original act of imposture to purloin the music of yet another well-known group. But, as many have pointed out, *maskanda* itself claims to channel the voices of gifted singers past, being known for its remixes of currently popular songs without acknowledgement.<sup>30</sup> There is a brilliant sense, here, that each repetition is itself a doubling, both the same yet different. This is curiously captured on the covers of several of Mqumeni’s famous albums (*iJukebox*, *iMagic*, *Autography*), which featured, prophetically, two Mqumenis side by side, each differently dressed, but in the same general style. The man and his doppelganger; doubles all the way down. Yet again, Freud (1919:9) signals to us: stories of the uncanny, he noted, are invariably concerned with the idea of the merging of the self with a foreign other that “doubl[es], divid[es] or interchange[s]” it.

In May 2012, the case was moved again, this time to the provincial court in Pietermaritzburg. The original charge of fraud had now been added to those of rape,

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<sup>29</sup> “Fake Maskandi CD is Hot,” Canaan Mdletshe, *Sowetan Live*, 30 March 2012; <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/entertainment/2012-03-30-fake-maskandi-cd-is-hot/>, accessed 24 August 2020.

<sup>30</sup> “Lazarus Rising: Strange Case of the Two uMqumenis.”



theft, and perjury. The lawyer who had been hired by the Khumalos, Johan Botha, was an Afrikaner with a reputation for winning cases for black clients. He seemed unsure what line of defense to take in the proceedings since, until the matter was resolved legally, it was not clear whether his client was Gcabashe or Mqumeni. Court hearings continued to draw ever larger crowds. Members of the public and the press alike were enthralled by the self-possession of the man in the dock, now widely referred to as “Lazarus Gcabashe” by the more skeptical.<sup>31</sup> The primary witness for the prosecution was a young woman who testified that she had been abducted and repeatedly raped by the defendant, whom she identified from press photographs. When she had met him, she told the court, he went by the name “Sphamandla.”<sup>32</sup> In her testimony she claimed that he persuaded her to take a walk with him to a nearby shopping plaza, whence he enticed her into a nearby forest -- and then on a mysterious journey during which he held her captive for several days. Her narrative moved seamlessly from quotidian events to details of her bewitchment by her captor, himself empowered by a traditional healer. Botha was quick to seize on such “irrational” evidence, seeking to undermine her credibility. On one occasion, the empathetic female magistrate cautioned the young woman that such talk would not help the case.

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<sup>31</sup> “Lazarus Sings for Fans”, *YouTube*, 18 February 2014; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7F7JSw-4Uv0><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7F7JSw-4Uv0><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7F7JSw-4Uv0>, accessed 23 October 2023.

<sup>32</sup> The choice of this name is fascinating: two contrasting, mass-mediated communicators share the name in contemporary South Africa: Sphamandla Hlatshwayo, an entrepreneurial evangelist who causes congregants to speak in tongues, and Sphamandla Dhludhlu, a top local hip-hop artist.

Two senior members of the Khumalo clan then insisted that none of this testimony was true. The accused was their Khulekane, their son: it was inconceivable that he would commit such a crime. He had been made the victim not only by occult abductors, they argued, but by opportunists, people conspiring to take advantage of his celebrated return. A second young woman told the court that the man in the dock had shown up on her doorstep in Soweto some months back, ostensibly on the run from thugs who sought to kill him. She claimed that she had given him shelter for some days, during which time he sat for hours on end listening to Mqumeni's music. "He seemed to be obsessed by it," she said. Strangely, he told her that the singer was about to be resurrected and would soon be making music as never before.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, the prisoner himself insisted that at the time the crimes were allegedly committed, he was being held captive by zombies near Johannesburg.

As the case dragged on, the Khumalos began to run out of money. Both they and Botha now argued that the case should properly be heard in a Zulu customary court. To be sure, the issues at stake turned on a range of cultural questions, like the niceties of kinship, marriage custom, zombies, and bewitchment that are notoriously difficult to reduce to liberal modern jurisprudence. Gcabashe's kin had also started to speak up. His sister told reporters that she was bewildered about why he would have become an impostor and pleaded with him to cease causing his family embarrassment.<sup>34</sup> Finally, on 16 June, 2016, Sibusiso John Gcabashe was found guilty by the Pietermaritzberg Magistrate's Court of rape, assault, kidnapping, attempting to escape from custody, and

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<sup>33</sup> "Lazarus Rising: Strange Case of the two uMqumenis."

<sup>34</sup> "Lazarus Rising: Strange Case of the two uMqumenis."

impersonating Khulekani Khumalo. He was sentenced to 28 years' imprisonment, the magistrate adding that he had shown no remorse during the trial and had traumatized his kin by claiming to be the deceased musician. He even had the temerity to sleep with Khulekani's widow. Shades, once more, of the case of Martin Guerre. The Khumalos vowed that they would appeal the judgment as soon as they had collected the resources to do so. Botha, their former lawyer, had ceased to represent them when the money ran out.<sup>35</sup>

By this time, the prisoner had been moved to a facility on the KwaZulu-Natal coast, where he was to serve his sentence. When we spoke with his warders – a group who spanned the race-class-gender-generation spectrum of South African society – they evinced unusual interest in their sensational prisoner. Referring to him only as Mqgqumeni, they appeared to be slightly in awe of him, praising his musical talent and confessing to having set up a makeshift recording studio for him near his cell. His dreadlocks had grown, they said, and he “looked more like himself.” What fascinated them above all was the almost unbelievable knowledge he displayed of the life and times of the great *maskandi*. Indeed, not one of them was willing to say with certainty that he was not the man he claimed to be. Is this, then, another instance of the collaboration of intimates in the production of a flawless impersonation?

#### IV

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<sup>35</sup> “Mqgqumeni Impersonator Sentenced to 22 Years and Three Months Imprisonment,” Xolani Dlamini, *Sowetan Live*, 29 June 2016; <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2016-06-29-mqgqumeni-impersonator-sentenced-to-22-years-and-three-months-imprisonment/>, accessed 25 August 2023.

It will have become clear from our story so far that two distinct ontologies of personhood are entwined in the drama of Mqqumeni's return. The charges of impersonation leveled against Gabashe were framed in terms of a modern liberal conception of the person as a self-possessed, self-conscious individual, in which selfhood is fashioned through the reasoned interplay between a sovereign self and its other/s. According to this conception, imposture is a form of theft. Modern liberal personhood confers the entitlement to property in one's own person and labor, and presumes moral and legal responsibility for one's own actions before the law. It also implies, as Ian Hacking (1991) notes, a personal identity vested in a unified memory and coherent self-knowledge; in this tradition, the prospect of "Two Souls in One Body" is not merely mad; it is downright uncanny. The idea of an external force taking possession of the person, as in a prophetic or spiritual calling, is archaic, sectarian, or psychotic.

The personhood animating the disputed figure of the *maskandi* as kinsman and inspired performer seems rather differently configured. In the latter, subjective identity is understood as relational, i.e., it is defined in terms of interdependent genealogical or generational categories – "fathers" and "sons" – rather than in terms of the autonomous self. It follows that voice, identity, and creative ownership in *maskanda* and the world it indexes is fluid, less essentialized within discrete individual bodies than in an interaction that occurs across time and space among persons, alive or dead. The poetic utterances of the singer, for instance, are understood from this vantage as a process of co-production. They are the yield of an ongoing interplay of influences among ancestors, other musicians, and works to be "sampled" – which might cast a new light on the

brazenly purloined *Amambula* album, for instance. In recent years, numerous CD's released under the name *Abafana baka Mqgumeni* -- the "boys," or "brothers" of Mqgumeni; a group of his maternal, Mseleku kin -- feature songs that replicate or redeploy his sound. They are often marketed in covers with images of him alongside his impersonators as look-alike pairs.<sup>36</sup>

Here is the rub: while such indigenous ontologies, and the customary law that accompanies them, remain salient for many South Africans, the latter are also citizens of a modern nation-state, governed by a liberal constitution that treats them as rights-bearing persons. Its law recognizes the state's authority to determine the identities of its subjects and the entitlements that accrue to them. Legalities here are plural. *Maskandi* are widely known to "appropriate freely without permission" and to remix versions of popular songs without crediting the creators.<sup>37</sup> But they also live in an advanced, market-based society where music of all kinds is big business and entrepreneurs seek to privatize its lucrative potential. The artists who wrote and recorded the songs on the *Amambula* album had every right, if they chose, to see it as their copyright, just as the matrikin of Mqgumeni could accuse the Khumalos and Gcabashe of attempting to steal their inheritance. I shall return to this issue below, and to the effort of the Khumalos to have the case transferred to a customary court.

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<sup>36</sup> See *Abafana Baka Mqgumeni: Udiwa Yini*. 15 May 2023; *You Tube*; [https://www.google.com/search?q=Abafana+baka+Mqgumani&rlz=1C1GCEJ\\_enUS1056US1056&oq=Abafana+baka+Mqgumani&gs\\_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBgg](https://www.google.com/search?q=Abafana+baka+Mqgumani&rlz=1C1GCEJ_enUS1056US1056&oq=Abafana+baka+Mqgumani&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBgg), accessed 7 November 2023.

<sup>37</sup> "Lazarus Rising: Strange Case of the Two uMqgumenis."

To what degree was this case a figment of intersecting metaphysical worlds, of the unresolved dialectics, contradictions positive and negative, of decolonization? On the face of it, as the story of Jacob and Essau attests, imposture is as old as human society itself. But it has also been argued that a concern with the performative self is inherent in the Western tradition of personhood. Marcel Mauss (1985;17) points out that the liberal modern concept of personhood, as both subject and object, dates back to Roman usage, where the word *persona* meant both “mask” (as the ritualized performance of personhood) and “true nature” (as in legal identity). The production of ego as a dialogue of subject and object, self and other, has played itself out in myriad specific idioms in different historical times and places in Western history. Stephen Greenblatt (1980) has famously located the rise of a modern consciousness of “self-fashioning” as an artful process in the European Renaissance.

But early modern Europe, argues Miriam Eliav-Feldon (2012), was also preoccupied with the dangerous, duplicitous potential of self-making. There was marked anxiety among sixteenth-century religious and civil authorities, she suggests, about the explosion of fraudulent identities plaguing society at large. This disquiet fueled an intensive search for reliable methods of personal identification and for the development of novel bodily-based means of verification and bureaucratic archiving – which themselves opened up new possibilities for counterfeit and dissembling. Eliav-Feldon stresses the religious basis of much of the obsession with dissimulation: the fervor of the Inquisition to detect faux Christians – in particular, conversos or dissembling Muslims -- or the desire to identify closet Catholics in Protestant communities, along with heretics, witches, and other minions of ‘Satan the deceiver’ (Revelation 12:9).

Punishment could be severe: the faux Martic Guerre, recall, was hung. Anxiety was also fostered by an awareness of new transnational worlds that expanded spatial imaginaries and fractured the boundaries of local forms of knowledge, opening new horizons for mobility and self-creation. Modern colonial conquest would ushered in yet further frontiers, and new challenges to the verification of authentic personhood, Figures like *maskanda* musicians, whose art depends on brokering the gap between cosmopolitan and local worlds, are often suspect

It is tempting, in other words to see parallels between this early modern moment and the seismic shifts of contemporary, late modern times. Certainly, there has been a notable preoccupation with the implications of impersonation in postcolonial South Africa. It is a concern brought to global attention by the bizarre case of the fake deaf interpreter, featured in the widely televised Mandela memorial service in December 2013.<sup>38</sup> The media relay a never-ending stream of examples of bogus lawyers,<sup>39</sup> nurses,<sup>40</sup> even soccer referees to an insatiable audience. During 2023/24 alone, the Health Professions Council of South Africa received more than 300 complaints about

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<sup>38</sup> "Mandela Memorial Sign Language Interpreter Accused of Being a Fake," Alexandra Topping, *The Guardian*, 11 December 2013; [www.theguardian.com/society/2013/dec/11/mandela-memorial-sign-language-interpreter-making-it-up-fake](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/dec/11/mandela-memorial-sign-language-interpreter-making-it-up-fake), accessed 30 December 2013.

<sup>39</sup> "Who is Watching the Lawyers," Ruth Hopkins and Grethe Koen, *Saturday Star*, 26 June 2012; [www.iol.com.za/Saturday-star/who-is-watching-the-lawyers-1.1328182](http://www.iol.com.za/Saturday-star/who-is-watching-the-lawyers-1.1328182), accessed 7 August 2012.

<sup>40</sup> "Interpol Roped into SAFA Investigation," SAPA, *Independent OnLine*, 20 December 2012; [www.iol.co.za/sport/soccer/interpol-roped-into-safa-investigation-1.1443476](http://www.iol.co.za/sport/soccer/interpol-roped-into-safa-investigation-1.1443476), accessed 21 December 2012.

allegedly fake medical practitioners. One was described as the *TikTok* sensation “Dr.” Matthew Bongani Lani, who regularly shared medical advice on the social media platform; another was a member of the Cape Town City Council.<sup>41</sup> The proliferation of counterfeit degrees and forms of certification starts from the top, from University Vice Chancellors to government ministers and CEO’s.<sup>42</sup> The Southern African Fraud Prevention Service recently released new statistics showing that fraudulent impersonation had increased by over 300% between 2019 and 2020.<sup>43</sup> This has been abetted by digitization and an ever more technically enhanced industry for forging documents of all kinds (Piot 2010), amounting to parallel bureaucracies – “doppelgangers of a legitimate civil service” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:16) -- in some national contexts. This is especially evident where the demand for credentialed expertise exceeds access to the means of their legitimate production; that is. where structural exclusion meets novel horizons of possibility, which is the case for many in post-apartheid South Africa. As James Siegel (1998:57) notes of Indonesia, such cloning is less about defying the law than a way of “creating a form of authority for oneself.”

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<sup>41</sup> “Quackdown — SA Regulator Flags Rise in Fake Doctors, Urges More ‘Education’ about the Menace,” Velani Ludidi, *The Daily Maverick*, 23 November 2023.; <https://twitter.com/dailymaverick/status/1722193147462107590>, accessed 9 November 2023.

<sup>42</sup> “Tshwane University of Technology Vice-chancellor Johnny Molefe Received his Doctorate from an Unaccredited Degree Mill.” Staff Writer, *MyBroadband*, 2 March 2016; <https://mybroadband.co.za/news/business/156817-biggest-fake-degree-scandals-in-south-africa.html>; accessed 5 October, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> “Consumer Talk with Wendy Knowler,” *Cape Talk*, 3 March 2021; <https://www.capetalk.co.za/features/211/consumertalk-with-wendy-knowler/410285/identity-fraud-rose-by-over-330-in-2020-here-s-one-way-to-protect-yourself-from-impersonators>; accessed 4 October 2023.



Gcabashe's fantasy of social and geographical mobility comes from a place where seductive promises of inclusion meet the hard truth of material impossibility. As such, it resonates with a *zeitgeist* captured by South African writers and film makers across the social spectrum after apartheid. This spirit is evident in Damon Galgut's novel, *Impostor* (2008), for instance, with its focus on the reinvention of identities as norms shift and maps are redrawn, when nobody is who they appear to be. Movies like *Hijack Stories* (Oliver Schmitz 2000) explore the dark underside of this heightened fascination with impersonation when regular means are scarce. The film follows the efforts of an unemployed black actor – a member of the fragile new middle class in postcolonial Johannesburg – who tries to pass himself off as a gangster for a new TV series. He apprentices himself to some real hoods to “learn their moves,” only to discover the brutal difference between fiction and the mean streets, where crime is not merely a mode of deception but also a hard-edged mode of production.

Clearly, the man who returned as the famous *maskanda* had mastered the moves well enough to convince some that he was the real thing. In so doing, he drew on a shared a living African vernacular and dense local knowledge. For Gcabashe, if it was he, grew up a few valleys away from Mggumeni. He was about the same age and spoke the same language of kinship and clanship, of ancestral influence, human rivalry, and occult harm. He, too, was raised at a time when the figure of the zombie had taken on renewed relevance, not only in global popular culture, but in the structure of feeling of the post-apartheid public. As transatlantic specter of dehumanized labor, the zombie was a vestige of a lost African past. Widely held to have originated in Caribbean, it was given new life in Hollywood in the 1930s not only as uncanny revenant, but as all-

purpose inhuman threat (Rath 2020). While reference to “zombies” is common in everyday English discourse in southern Africa, black populations more frequently use indigenous terms (*umkhovu* in isiZulu; *setlotlwane* in Setswana), making evident a different genealogy, one that sees these specters as the captive aids of witches, their slaves in all things ill.

As noted elsewhere (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), the figure of the zombie -- a person turned by an evil other into an insensate being, like a tool, that exists only to generate wealth for its master -- became palpable as never before in South African life with the advent of liberalization. Coinciding with the late 20<sup>th</sup> century loss of wage labor in the country and the rise, after the end of apartheid, of “jobless growth,” the living dead appeared in a diverse array of communications, from the headlines of national newspapers<sup>44</sup> to acclaimed theater productions,<sup>45</sup> labor disputes, and local court hearings.<sup>46</sup> So much was this so that a *Commission of Inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murder* (Ralushai *et al* 1995) was appointed by the administration of the Northern Province of South Africa after the end of apartheid; it reported an “epidemic” of occult-related killing and a widespread fear of zombies. The living dead are often associated with the sudden appearance of wealth of uncertain origin in otherwise depleted zones. They appear to have replaced the real, live workers, depriving them of the jobs in industrial areas around Johannesburg on which rural communities like Nqutu

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<sup>44</sup> “Disturbing Insight into Kokstad Zombie Killings, Ntokozo Gwamanda, *Sowetan*, 15 July 1998, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> The play *Ipizombi*, by Brett Bailey, was featured at the annual Standard Bank Arts Festival in July 1996, and was later televised for nation broadcasting by the SABC.

<sup>46</sup> “Disturbing Insight into Kokstad Zombie Killings.”

were largely dependent. Those communities now subsist on a mix of social welfare and informal enterprise, much of it female. Bereft of the migrant labor that was the rite of passage to adult manhood, many males in the countryside lack the means to marry and found families – forcing them to find new ways of producing selves and livelihoods, legitimate or otherwise.

*Maskanda* music was itself a product of this contorted history. When, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, deregulation eroded the migrant labor system, *maskandi* continued to ply their trade between the centers of musical commerce and the countryside, homeland of their remastered “tradition.” Their soulful sound draws on that tradition, using it to express nostalgia for labor lost, to lament the loss, too, of a certain kind of masculine selfhood, the stature that came of the capacity to turn wages into the production of households and futures. The signature plaintiveness of Mgqumeni’s voice, his preoccupation with themes of loss, betrayal, and the triumph of money over love, strikes to the heart of lumpen life, resonating with its structure of feeling.

Yet the titles of some of the singer’s best loved albums (like *iMagic*, or *iSpirit*) suggest something more than the reflections of a solitary, introspective subject contemplating an unforgiving history. They gesture to a more enigmatic, unbounded vision of personhood and human creativity that is fundamentally intersubjective, even ghostly. On the covers of even his most personal albums -- like *Autography*, noted above (Figure 1) – Mgqumeni is pictured alongside his other, each staring directly at the viewer in slightly varying garb and attitude. Durkheim’s “double-centered” self? Freud’s Doppelgänger? Certainly, the image suggests uncanniness, all the way down.

## V

I have noted that Freud (1919:14) described the uncanny as a particular sensation, a creepy feeling that takes hold of a person when things familiar seem somehow alien, *unheimlich*, like being in a haunted house. Yet, despite the riot of fantasy and freakishness he identified in the repressed human psyche, he remained a rationalist, bent on reducing such phantasms to reason in the waking world. He saw the occurrence of the uncanny in that world as a momentary lapse, a return of something we once believed in – before civilization banished magic and mystery to the nursery, the unconscious, the savage mind (1919:1,14). In this he was like Durkheim (1995), for whom enchantment hovered at the edge of secular reason, ever ready to step in where logic ran out. Marx was no less evolutionary a thinker. But for him, the fetishistic and the occult were integral to the magic of modernity itself, *produced* by the mystifications of its chosen form of reason – the capitalist economy and its inherent contradictions -- a mystification he believed was yet to be overcome by a critical science.

The protagonists of the story I have told here are no strangers to modern enchantments, both their promises and the illusions they foster. As the drama of Mqumeni makes plain, these actors -- as colonial subjects, wage workers, right-bearing citizens -- are fully enmeshed in Euromodernity's narratives of self-realization and enlightenment, although the degree to which the material benefits of Euromodernity apply to their kind has always been in question. Yet they are also heirs to another ontological tradition, every bit as firmly rooted in the present -- a way of seeing that presumes inter-subjective influence and agency, the ongoing transaction of matter and spirit, the existence of mysteries that refuse the logic of practical reason. Strangely

resonant with what Durkheim called the “dualism of human nature,” this acknowledgement of the presence within the person of “something other” than the self cannot simply be seen as the holdover of a primitive past. It was this “something other,” so irrepressibly embodied in the equivocal figure of Magqumeni, that makes evident the dark side of liberal individualism, suppressed by the modernist “cult” of individualism that by its nature suppresses the social production of persons and lived world.

Freud was himself not fully convinced that the concept the “uncanny” could account for the unstable array of sensations and events to which he sought to apply it. Perhaps this dis-ease signals the ultimate intractability of these queer phenomena to the myth of disenchantment. For the assertions of secular reason, and the human individual they presume at its core are forever haunted by the ghostly doubles they seek to vanquish, joined at the hip, as Durkheim insisted, to the shadows cast by the boundaries of their own reason. Mcgumeni, both alive and dead, made visible a truth about the nature of personhood that, far from a return of savage thought, applies to *all* human experience. Perhaps this is why, as social conditions in our late modern world increasingly undermine the premises of the Enlightenment, it becomes an ever more widely shared sentiment that none of us – anywhere – has ever really been modern, (Latour 1993), or conversely, that we *all* are, and have long been.

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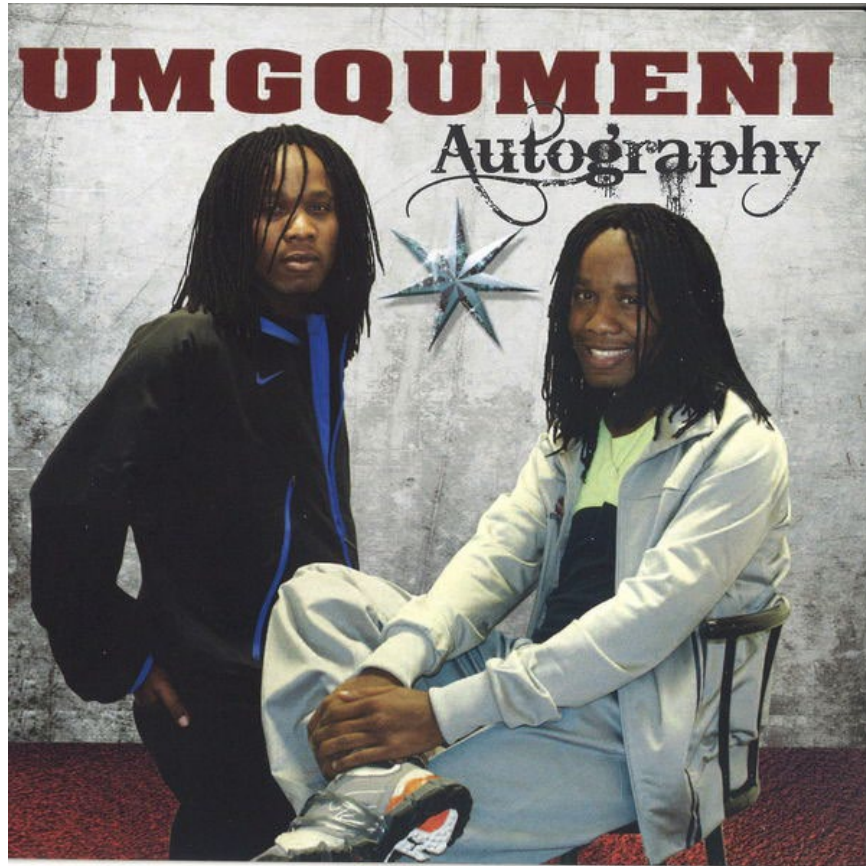
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Figure 1





Cover: *Autography* Album, 2009 (SONY)