Queer(ing) touch and worldmaking in the music videos of Nakhane

By Gibson Ncube

Abstract

In this article, I analyse three music videos by South African artist Nakhane using Connor's concept of the skin as an "expressive screen", Coetzee's conceptualisation of reading what is "written under the skin" and Macharia's framing of touch leading to pleasure, irritation, and even pain. Nakhane has created a significant body of literary, musical, and film work that not only explores what it means to be queer in Africa but, more importantly, what it means to be and become human. The music videos I examine are titled "In the dark room", "Clairvoyant" and "Tell me your politik". These videos demonstrate how touch and affect play a central role in making queer bodies and experiences visible. The main argument of this article is that skin, as an expressive screen, serves as a canvas on which queer affect and touch are negotiated and performed. The portrayal of touch on the skin, in various ways, is significant as it emphasises the importance of intimacy and embodiment in queer worldmaking.

Introduction

In a 2013 *Mail & Guardian* article titled "Hold hands in friendship – and be proud to be an African", Dlanga explores the historical significance of touch in African societies. He argues that touch has played a fundamental role in how Africans perceive themselves and interact with others, serving as a language that goes beyond words. Dlanga explains that touch "symbolised so many things that cannot be put into words. It was so natural that we were never even aware that we were doing it" (2013, n.p.). This emphasis underscores the deep-rooted nature of touch in social interactions, representing a range of emotions and relationships. However, Dlanga contends that Western cultural norms have fundamentally transformed the way Africans engage with touch and, subsequently, with one

another. The introduction of Western ideologies, particularly regarding the body and sexuality, has led to significant changes in the perception of touch and how we relate to other bodies. The introduction and subsequent imposition of Western ideologies during the colonial era changed perceptions of the body, sexuality, interpersonal and intimate relations among African people. Western epistemologies, grounded in Christian morality and Victorian sensibilities, framed touch—especially between people of the same-sex or in non-erotic contexts—as inappropriate or suspect, associating it with deviance and hypersexuality (Tamale 2011). Scholars such as Nzegwu (2006) contend that the colonial gaze redefined African bodies and their interactions with and to one another through the lens of Western mores. This gaze sexualised Black bodies, often framing African practices of communal living and physical closeness as exotic or lascivious. In the context of touch, what had previously been a natural, communal expression of friendship or kinship was recoded as erotic or sexually deviant. Touch, particularly between men, which had previously been seen as expressing social cohesion and familial affection, began to be viewed with scepticism through a lens that conflated it with homosexuality, which was itself stigmatised under colonial rule (Tallie 2019). Such a reframing of touch had the potential of limiting the richness of touch as a means of communication and connection within many African communities.

In this article, I focus on touch in three music videos of breakout South African singer, songwriter, and actor Nakhane. The three videos are: "In the dark room", "Clairvoyant" and "Tell me your politik". Each of the videos is taken from one of the three albums released by Nakhane and can be read as a development in their[1] attempts to grapple with queerness and queer worldmaking. Nakhane's music videos centre male bodies that touch and thereby share intimate proximity. Instead of reading these videos solely through the lens of eroticism and sexuality, I am interested in demonstrating that touch can be a productive site of understanding African queer[2] lived experiences. In her book *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch*, Classen (2012, p.xi) explains that "touch lies at the heart of our experience of ourselves and the world yet it often remains unspoken and, even more so, unhistoricised". In my focus on touch in Nakhane's music videos, I argue that these visuals coupled with the musical soundscapes should not be solely interpreted through the narrow lens of eroticism and sexuality. Rather, I propose a nuanced reading and analysis which explores touch as a productive site for understanding the complexities of African queer lived experiences. In this article, I set out to grapple with three overarching issues. First, I consider how the portrayal of touch in Nakhane's music videos challenges traditional understanding of masculinity within (South) African cultures, particularly in relation to same-sex intimacy. Second, I am interested in the ways in which touch can engender kinship and community-making for marginalised queer people. Third, I want to think through how the depiction of what is deemed illicit touch can be a site of resistance against sociocultural norms that restrict queer expressions of affection.

In thinking through these questions, I contend that touch, bodily contact, and affect are sites of queer worldmaking and sites of challenging the invisibilisation of queer bodies and queer lived experiences. Such a focus on touch, I argue, is an opportunity to rethink and certainly reconstruct what it means to be queer, to be queer especially in

Notes

1 Nakhane uses the pronouns "they/them"

2 In the context of this article, I use the term "queer" to refer to encompass all non-normative gender and sexual identities. Many scholars have raised concerns about the appropriateness of this term in making sense of African lived realities (see Nyanzi, 2014) and that queer might not necessarily capture the diversity of gender and sexual identities (see Matebeni, 2012). Despite these reservations and concerns, I use the term queer to capture the diversity of non-normative gender and sexual identities "especially in view of the paucity of terms and vocabularies in Africa that positively capture identities that do not fall within the heterosexual category" (Ncube, 2022:10-11).

Africa, and indeed queer and African. In my analysis of Nakhane's videos, I am interested in how affect and touch are central to making queer bodies and queer lived experiences visible. This visibility, which is itself an act of defiance, challenges the hierarchies of which forms of human touch and contact are deemed socially correct and which are considered incorrect and therefore undesirable.

> "I am interested in how skin and touch are central in queer worldmaking."

Some theoretical and methodological considerations

In this article, I am interested in how skin and touch are central in queer worldmaking. They have the potential to be transgressive of societal norms that dictate what forms of touch are considered correct and decent, which bodies are allowed to touch and how these bodies can touch each other. In this way of thinking, skin, often heavily regulated in mainstream culture through the way people dress and diverse standards of beauty that are based on skin, becomes an important site for reclaiming agency and expressing identity. Importantly, it is undeniable that the skin is also the basis for histories of race and racism more so in the context of South Africa. This is especially relevant considering Coetzee's assertion that "race (easily, too easily, read on and from the skin) is in South African everyday life an extremely visible category, even hyper-visible. Skin's very surface seems to insist on certainty, as if the meanings and possibilities of the body are inscribed on and can be read from the skin itself" (2019, p.35). Building on this, it is worth acknowledging how the haptic is often framed as embodying the erotic and the potential to titillate. However, I want to focus on how touch is also a site of worldmaking for black queer bodies.

For the purposes of this article, I primarily draw upon Connor's work on the skin as an "expressive screen" (Connor 2004, p.49), Coetzee's exploration of reading the skin and what lies beneath it, and Macharia's framing of touch as encompassing pleasure, irritation, and even pain (Macharia 2019, p.5). I am interested in the central role played by the skin due to its intrinsic connection to touch and corporeal contact. In his *Book of Skin*, Connor argues that the "skin is the bearer and container of meanings" (2004, p.49). He suggests that the skin carries diverse forms of meaning, emphasising the plural nature of these meanings. This implies that the skin can be read in multiple ways. Furthermore, these meanings are not fixed; they are fluid and adaptable. Connor also explains that the skin functions as both a surface and a screen, allowing us to "experience delight" and "appreciate a wide range of pleasures and sensations" (2004, p.273). In addition to being a carrier of multiple meanings, the skin is also a sensuous surface that facilitates intimacy and pleasure. Building upon the concept of reading the skin, Coetzee emphasises the importance of delving beneath the skin to uncover what Macharia refers to as "the various sensations of attrition and pleasure, and the ways bodies and forms of social legibility – including gender – are dismantled and reconstructed" (2019, p.26). According to Coetzee, beneath the skin, we encounter "unequal and opposing narratives" that serve as a condensed representation of a particular embodied history (2019, p.4). These insights into the skin underscore its dual significance. On one hand, the skin can be seen as a surface that conceals and envelops the body. On the other hand, it acts as a surface "upon which an image can be projected, unveiling deeper insights" (Coetzee, 2019, p.10). As I engage with these interpretations of the skin, I am particularly interested in exploring the deeper insights and understandings that arise from viewing the body and skin as sites where intimacy and worldmaking are performed.

In his book *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy across the Black Diaspora*, Macharia devises the concept of frottage as a productive lens of considering how touch, embodiment and the libidinal are important in creating and making sense of what he terms "usable histories and liveable lives" (2019, p.3). Macharia also argues quite convincingly of how frottage as a method grounded on touch and friction enables the conceptualisation of how the rubbing of bodies against each other is a creative

way in which "the sexual can be used to imagine and create worlds" (2019, p.4) and also how the diverse "sensations of attrition and pleasure and of how bodies and forms of social legibility – including gender" (Macharia 2019, p.26) are made possible through the contact of bodies. One of the most important interventions that Macharia makes in *Frottage* is his contention that "scholars of sex and gender rarely consider African gendering frameworks prior to colonialism as conceptually rich ways of thinking through embodiment and sociality" (Macharia 2019, p.25). By foregrounding the libidinal and corporeal intimacy, Macharia's theorisation of frottage as a "relation of proximity" is important in imagining new ways in which queerness can be understood through a focalisation of touch and embodiment (2019, p.4).

In the context of Africa, focusing on touch and skin becomes particularly insightful for understanding queer lived experiences and queer worldmaking. On the continent, these elements hold immense power to transgress societal norms dictating acceptable forms of relation and interaction. The skin, often the site through which dignity and respectability are negotiated, becomes a powerful site for reclaiming agency, challenging societal norms and expressing identity.

Engaging with these ideas, I want to show that the body and the skin are canvases on and through which affect and touch are negotiated and performed. The representation of the naked skin, of the skin being touched in different ways is important in that it invites an appreciation of the centrality of intimacy and embodiment in queer worldmaking and in rethinking hierarchies and grammars of what constitutes proper use and revealing of the skin and importantly what is deemed the correct way of relating to other bodies and touching them. I will analyse three music videos by Nakhane: "In the dark room", "Clairvoyant" and "Tell me your politik" and focus on how each offers a unique way of understanding and remembering queer lived experiences. I use the verb "remembering" to think of the process of stitching together negated bodies, forms of touch that are deemed illicit and invalidated embodied experiences in a way in which the humanness and full humanity of queer bodies is not only restored but legitimated.

Beyond pleasure and pain: The affective spectrum of touch in "In the dark room"

The song "In the dark room" is taken from Nakhane's debut album *Brave Confusion* (2013). I explain in another article that this "album is a fusion of miscellaneous genres and sounds that complement one another startlingly well. This extraordinary and effortless blending of different genres can be interpreted as representing a form of defiance to being catalogued and boxed into something coherent and legible by normative social mores and standards" (Ncube 2015, p.40). While my emphasis in the earlier article was on the queer defiance that Nakhane's album offers, here I am interested in how the dark room, as both a literal and metaphorical space, evokes ideas of secrecy and hiddenness, resonating with Nakhane's broader exploration of queer identity and the tension between visibility and invisibility. However, as I will show, the notion of a dark room, such as that used in developing photographs, is a space of possibilities, a space of where queer self-expression develops.

This video is shot entirely in black and white. The black and white aesthetic, I will argue, can be interpreted as a stripping away of societal constructs and prejudices, presenting the queer body in its most raw and honest form, without the filters or judgments often imposed by a heteronormative world. The video opens with a wide shot of a dark room which appears to be a dilapidated and abandoned prison cell because of the way in which the windows are placed away from the ground. This image of the prison is especially relevant when thinking about queer lived experiences. Considering the stigma attached to queerness in Africa, the closet – captured in the metaphor of the prison – is "an ideational repository for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals whose erotic desires or sexual identities remain hidden or undisclosed to others" (Davis 2015, p.960). The closet, in its functioning, attempts to obfuscate ways of being and identities which are considered socially undesirable. Such obfuscation underscores what Michel Foucault terms the "manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body" (Foucault 1980, p.93). In my analysis of the closet in African literature, I explain that it can be both a site of disempowerment and a space in and

“The presentation of the dressed and undressed bodies of the two characters has another layer of meaning.”

through which queer people exercise their agency (Ncube 2016). It is disempowering in the sense that it forces queer people to live a double life. They take part in a social posturing in which they have a public persona that embodies ways of being deemed correct within heteropatriarchal societies. Within the closet, they can, however, experience some sort of freedom in which to express and perform identities that are not permitted in the public sphere. In the case of Nakhane's "In the dark room", the viewer is brought into the closet and witnesses what happens in it. The prison cell setting poignantly symbolises the societal confines and marginalisation that queer people often face, forced into metaphorical closets to conceal their authentic selves. Yet, by bringing the viewer into this intimate space, the video reclaims the closet as a site of empowerment, where queer desires and identities can be unapologetically expressed without judgement.

The wide shot picture of the dark room reveals that within the room there is a tattered mattress and a chair. Nakhane then appears dressed in black pants and a white shirt. They are standing still in the middle of a room. Nakhane's solitary presence and the lack of any other figures or objects in the video's first frame place the focus squarely on their body and their presence/existence as a queer individual. It invites the viewer to confront their own perceptions and biases, challenging the notion that queer bodies should be hidden or erased from public view. As Nakhane begins to sing, they also start to dance, erotically gyrating their waist. At the same time, they touch themselves tenderly. As they dance, a man appears. This second man is only wearing black underpants. The stark, gritty setting and the man's exposed skin create a sense of vulnerability and sexual tension.

However, when the two touch and come into bodily contact, it is in fact the fully clothed Nakhane who appears vulnerable. This scene presents an intriguing contrast in power dynamics through their body language and positioning. While the man who is wearing only underwear appears more physically vulnerable, his assertive stance and posture convey a sense of dominance and control over the Nakhane. The dishevelled setting further adds to the ambiguous and tense atmosphere, leaving the true nature of their interaction open to interpretation.

The presentation of the dressed and undressed bodies of the two characters has another layer of meaning. Nakhane's dressed body, adorned in almost formal clothing appears to represent an adherence to social standards. The other character's bare skin, devoid of any adornments or coverings, can be seen as a powerful statement of unapologetic embodiment and self-acceptance. It rejects societal norms and expectations that often dictate how bodies, particularly queer bodies, should be presented or concealed. This contrast highlights the struggle between conformity and authenticity that may be faced by many queer people. The vulnerable yet defiant posture of the unclothed man suggests a reclamation of agency over his own identity and expression. The juxtaposition of the two characters invites reflection on the multifaceted aspects of human experience that transcend simplistic binaries or assumptions.

As the two continue to dance, the singer exclaims "I hope you know I will hate myself in the morning for this". If focus is placed solely on what is said verbally, then one would read in this remark some form of guilt and shame undergirds the physical contact and touch between the two characters. However, if we also engage with the images that accompany the lyrics, a new layer and nuance meaning can be uncovered. The image of the two characters touching and caressing; especially read in conjunction with the vertiginous polyrhythms of the music, gestures towards how, through corporeal touch, queer bodies become visible in ways that foreground an embodied articulation of desire and intimacy that transcends heteronormative gazes and frames queer existence as a dynamic and relational

process of becoming. Intimacy is important in allowing the queer characters to become visible, not just to each other but to the viewers as well. In their visibility, these bodies are involved in queer worldmaking through a process which Nakayama and Morris explain to be a "messy enterprise driven by a vision of another world, another way of living" (2014, p.vi). As Bennett contends, the "visual affirmation of queer lives" is oftentimes "the first step in instigating productive modes of worldmaking and kinship" (2014, p.222). In this way, corporeal touch is pivotal in queer worldmaking. In the way "In the dark room" showcases intimate moments, it plays a central role in challenging normative standards of what bodies should do and how they should touch each other.

In the scene described above, in a form of dance routine, the two characters seem to be involved in a fight in which they push and pull each other. In a dance routine that imitates capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian dance-like martial art, they appear to find pleasure in this dance routine that imitates combat. Chengeta points out that touch has different gradations and that "touch [can] become harmful" (2021, p.227). The question to ask though is whether the touch embodied in the dance imitating a fight is harmful. In the case of "In the dark room", the touch is not harmful or violent. Rather, it is a form of titillating touch that borders on the precipice of the painful yet still remaining quite affective. The affective frictions of the bodies are pivotal in queering touch and desire. The queer affect captured in this music video functions by redrawing the lines between bodies, creating new impressions and orientations of what touch is deemed permissible. The choreographed struggle between the two men can be read as a subversive performance that renegotiates how masculine presenting bodies can interact and express intimacy. In fact, their dance troubles heteropatriarchal scripts of masculine aggression, reframing it as a sensual entanglement that generates both tension and tenderness.

This video shows that queer bodies, materialised through touch, have the capacity to experience and express a diversity of emotions that range from pleasure, irritation and almost pain. When this video is read as a process of queer space-making and queer worldmaking, it can be interpreted as a defiant reclamation of space and visibility for queer bodies that have historically been marginalised, oppressed, or forced into the closet. The derelict environment in which this video is shot suggests a rejection of conventional spaces and norms, creating a sense that queer individuals must forge their own spaces and their own worlds, where they can exist authentically without fear or shame.

This video employs the power of the exposed skin and corporeal touch to reclaim space and to assert the presence, validity, and humanity of queer individuals. "In the dark room" invites the viewer to confront their own perceptions and to engage in the process of "queer worldmaking"– creating spaces where queer people and their lived experiences are not only accepted but also legitimated.

The subversiveness of touch and queer bodies in "Clairvoyant"

The second video which I analyse in this article is "Clairvoyant". The video is based on the song taken from Nakhane's sophomore album You Will Not Die (2018). The song describes the vulnerability that accompanies being queer and being in love. Interestingly, not only is this video age-restricted, but it is also flagged as "inappropriate for some users" on YouTube. The inappropriateness of the video is certainly not because of the way in which the video grapples with issues of sex and sexuality given that mainstream platforms regularly feature content with similarly explicit sexual themes. I contend that it is precisely because the video deals with queer love, sex and sexuality that it has been flagged as inappropriate.

Although this video features Nakhane with a male character, it shifts considerably from the vision proffered in "In the dark room". For one, "Clairvoyant" is in full colour compared to the black and white montage of "In the dark room". Also, the video of "Clairvoyant" is more daring, if not subversive, in its depiction of touch between the queer bodies. The video shows naked queer bodies which are confident in their own skin. The nakedness is not in any way hypersexualising of the two characters. Neither does the nakedness present them as vulnerable. In fact, what we see are two bodies that are confident in themselves, and which do not exude any shame. These are bodies that want neither to hide nor be hidden.

If "In the dark room" grapples with questions of trying to find pleasure in pain, in "Clairvoyant" pleasure and intimacy abound. Touch in this second video is evidently more erotic and titillating. Although the video begins with two masculine presenting protagonists, wearing only white underwear briefs, sitting apart on a balcony and then on a flight of stairs, it does not take long for them to come into physical contact.

In one scene, Nakhane is captured standing behind a man. They touch, caress, and kiss whilst the man stands motionless and is almost expressionless. The camera zeroes in on the minutest forms of touch: Nakhane running their hand over their lover's chest, their lips brushing against the lover's neck, or their hands interlaced in embrace. The camera zooms in on their skins and moves across their naked bodies capturing even the goosebumps on their skins. Such a focus on queer intimacy is subversive in that it makes it possible to imagine queer masculine present characters being in love and expressing this love in very intimate and caring ways. There is no hypermasculinity present in this video. Unlike in "In the dark room" where there is an evident dynamic of power between the two characters, in "Clairvoyant" the two appear to be equals in that each gives and receives pleasure. This video is also subversive because of the way in which the intimation of the penis completely absent from the process of love making and intimacy. This suggests that "it is possible to imagine gay sex without necessarily evoking phallocentric and heteropatriarchal vocabularies that thrive on the binary conceptualisation of any relationship between two bodies" (Ncube 2022, p.110). In so doing, "Clairvoyant" proposes what Sedgwick terms "new expressive grammars" of making sense of bodies, sex, and sexuality (2003, p.64). In decentring the power of the phallus, this video gestures towards innovative ways of conceptualising not just masculinity but queer intimacy.

I will consider three other short scenes in this video to highlight how it broaches issues of subversion. This subversion is articulated through the quotidian or what Ndebele (1986) terms the "everyday" or the "ordinary". In one scene, the two characters move to a bathroom where they are depicted inside a bathtub. Nakhane's lover rises and leaves the bathtub and his wet naked back and buttocks flash through the screen. Nakhane remains in the tub, fixated on the naked body of their lover. The dim, greenish lighting and the partially obscured figures create an ambiance of pleasure and ecstasy. This focus on queer bodies, the pleasure they experience and the way they are comfortable in their own skins challenges the image of queer people being vulnerable and disposable. Such a representation of queer people is important not just in ensuring their visibility but also their social legibility. In my examination of the legibility of queer bodies in African films, I conclude elsewhere that "in thinking of legibility, it is important not to focus solely on how queer bodies challenge heteronormativity and become socially visible. Rather, it is fruitful to consider that legibility can be expressed in small and everyday acts and not just blatant political acts. It is thus worth privileging the quotidian as a possible site of registering legibility" (Ncube 2022, p.66). In the case of "Clairvoyant", the ordinary act of bathing, for example, becomes subversive when it involves two masculine presenting characters. It is certainly through these small, everyday acts of rebellion that heteronormative structures are challenged, and the legibility of queer embodiment is asserted. It is in this line of thinking that Asante concludes that "the erotic [is] part of the negotiations of the concerns of the everyday, which is not distinct from but integral to the material conditions of lived experiences in Africa" (2020, p.113). Asante's assertion that the erotic is intrinsically tied to the everyday and lived realities in Africa underscores the power of Nakhane's portrayal. By rendering the sensual and intimate aspects of queer African life visible through seemingly mundane acts, "Clairvoyant" offers a validation to those experiences. The subversive nature of this video thus lies in its ability to locate the erotic and the intimate within the ordinary forms of touch, challenging heteronormative scripts that have systematically marginalised and excluded queer African embodiment from depictions of the everyday. This idea of the everyday speaks to Connor's insistence that worldmaking stems from "a large range of ordinary experiences" (2004, p.35). Connor explains in this regard that "we then return our own relation of impressibility and imprintedness to the world in all the many ways in which we seek to make our mark on it, to make permanently visible our touching of the world. We

depend upon the world to give us the shape which we present to it, in order to feel it" (2004, p.35-36). It is through the ordinary, the almost everyday forms of touch that queer worldmaking is made possible. Queer worldmaking occurs not only through grand gestures or overt political statements, but also through the subtle, mundane exchanges that defy heteronormative expectations.

In another subversive scene, Nakhane and their lover kiss openly. This moment is a powerful reclaiming of intimacy that challenges long-standing taboos and prejudices surrounding queer black love. For a long time, black queer desires and bodies have been controlled, pathologized, and made invisible by oppressive societal structures rooted in homophobia and heteronormativity. By depicting two black men engaging in something as simple yet profound as a kiss, Nakhane's video asserts the fundamental humanity and dignity of queer black individuals. Morris and Sloop explain that when heterosexual couples kiss, even in public, it is often not even noticed because it "would merely signify a largely accepted expression of mutual pleasure, affection, love" (2006, p.2). However, when queer people kiss, this "constitutes a 'marked' and threatening act, a performance that is instantly understood as contrary to hegemonic assumptions about public behaviour and the common good, because it invites certain judgments about deviant sexual behaviour and its imagined intrusions, violations, and contagions – judgments that inevitably go beyond the mere fact of their having a mutually affirming experience" (Morris and Sloop 2006, p.2). The kissing of queer men, therefore, challenges the dehumanising narratives that have historically deprived black queer people of control over their own bodies and sexualities. In this particular video, the kiss becomes a symbol of liberation, a statement that black queer men have the full right to explore themselves, cultivate intimacy, and create joyous worlds on their own terms.

The kiss becomes especially subversive when placed alongside the final shot of the video, where the camera zooms out from Nakhane's naked buttock as he lies on a bed with his lover. This defiant ending delivers a critical rebuke to societal norms that have historically sought to control, shame, sexualise, and marginalise queer black bodies. Although the depiction of the queer black buttock can be seen as a source of discomfort and taboo, it boldly rejects heteronormative standards of representation. To fully appreciate this bold representation, it is necessary to engage in what Allan (2016) calls a "reading from behind". This involves examining the various meanings associated with the buttock and the discomfort it may evoke. According to Allan (2016, p.4), the behind in its diverse iterations is central to the abject, yet it also encompassed eroticism, pleasure, affect, and sexuality. By focusing on the buttock, the video asserts the humanity and dignity of queer black men, encouraging them to openly embrace their desires and physicality. Rather than objectifying the nude black male body, the video presents it as part of a tender, postcoital moment, challenging narratives that have dehumanised and hypersexualised black masculinity. It reimagines the naked queer black male body through the lens of intimacy, vulnerability, and serenity, rather than through exoticism and deviance. Thus, the closing shot serves as both a provocative political statement and a humanising artistic choice. It celebrates queer black love, sexuality, and selfhood in their splendid and radically honest glory.

"The kissing of queer men, therefore, challenges the dehumanising narratives that have historically deprived black queer people of control over their own bodies and sexualities."

"Clairvoyant" subverts pervasive stereotypes that have long fetishised and exoticised black male sexuality while simultaneously denying black men the capacity for tenderness and vulnerability (see Manuel 2015). The gentle, loving nature of the kiss dismantles these toxic narratives, revealing the multidimensionality of black queer experiences. This music video defies societal norms and expectations by depicting a tender, intimate moment between two men, potentially showcasing a queer romantic encounter. The use of touch and physical closeness throughout the video are powerful tools for exploring these themes.

Politicising touch and queer worldmaking in "Tell me your politik"

In this section, I will analyse the music video of the song "Tell me your politik" which is taken from Nakhane's album entitled *Bastard Jagon* (2023). As suggested by the title, the song is very political and grapples with how ideological compatibility is sine qua non to intimacy. The lyrics of the song open with a seemingly straightforward invitation: "You can kiss me if you want to / I wouldn't say no / And touch me if you want to / How could I say no?" However, a crucial caveat emerges: "But first you gotta / Tell me your politik." The hesitation captured in the coordinating conjunction "but" disrupts the initial gesture towards sensuality. Nakhane demands to know the "politik" of a potential lover, hinting at a desire for deeper and more genuine connection beyond fleeting physicality.

Of the three videos analysed in this article, "Tell me your politik" is the only one in which Nakhane is not a protagonist. Instead, he makes fleeting appearances, his vocals providing the soundtrack to the visuals. The music video opens with a striking sequence involving a group of black men seemingly undergoing an intense combat training regime. There is an unmistakable display of hypermasculinity as these men perform various drills and routines; their deep, guttural shouts and groans reverberating with a blown-up machismo. The scenes that foreground hypermasculinity are interspaced by quick flashing scenes in which two men touch in erotic ways. The two men then break away from the group and are captured facing each other, their heavy breaths and intense gazes charged with undeniable desire and intimacy. Despite their outwardly masculine appearances—muscular builds adorned with heavy beards—there is a tenderness in the way they look at each other and a sense of vulnerability cuts through the rigid posturing.

In a defiant act, the two men then embrace and caress each other. This tender moment between two distinctly masculine figures is a powerful reclamation of the multidimensionality of male identity, desire and intimacy. It dispels the reductive notion that masculinity and queerness are intrinsically incompatible, or that queer male bodies are inherently feminised. By juxtaposing such a soft, loving tableau against the backdrop of hypermasculine performance, "Tell me your politik" forces viewers to confront their own preconceptions about gender expression and especially what queer masculinity means and entails.

What this video does, which the other two do not, is to feature women characters. This adds new layers and textures of nuance to the video's exploration of gender, sexuality, and desire. In one pivotal scene, which takes place in what looks like a nightclub, a man who was previously depicted in an intimate encounter with another man is now captured being seductively engaged by a woman. He proceeds to engage in an overtly erotic dance with her, their bodies moving together in a charged display of heterosexual desire and attraction. This contrast challenges reductive notions of rigid gender and sexual identities. By showing the same masculine figure moving fluidly between same-sex intimacy to cross-sex eroticism, the video gestures towards a broadening of the understanding of desire, intimacy and sexuality. It underscores that individual desires, attractions, and expressions of sensuality need not be confined to narrow, binary categories of gay or straight, male or female.

The sensual dancing sequence between the man and the woman subverts traditional gender scripts that dictate how masculinity and femininity should be embodied and performed. The masculine-presenting figure does not adhere to staid expectations of how gay or straight men should act. He fluidly engages in erotic encounters with personas of different genders. This artistic vision dismantles heteropatriarchal hegemonies which thrive on gender and sexual dichotomies. In this way, "Tell me your politik" opens up a vital dialogue about the vastness of human sexuality, one that transcends rigid categories and scripted

performances of gender. It challenges the societal impulse to flatten the rich complexities of identity, attraction, intimacy, and self-expression into palatable, monolithic and easily defined boxes. The video instead celebrates the malleable, ever-shifting contours of these experiences as an integral part of experiencing human gender and sexual identities.

What is also important in this video is an added layer of race being introduced to the understanding of touch between men. There are acts of aggressive touch between the video's protagonist and their white commanding officer. In the opening scene previously described of the two black men intimately looking at each other, a white commanding officer passes them. He looks at them with disdain and disappears from the frame. The white commanding officer is then portrayed speaking in what seems to be a harsh tone to the recruits. He approaches one of the men he had passed, pulls him by his vest and pushes him to the ground. This scene shifts almost immediately to the nightclub scene. As the recruit dances with the woman, the white commanding officer has the same disdain that he had when he had passed the two male recruits. He disrupts the dancing couple and pushes the male recruit from the woman. The recruit tries to fight with the commanding officer and a group of the recruit's colleagues hold him back. The video ends with the commanding officer looking down on the black recruit and violently holding his cheeks in his hands in a show of his power and dominance.

The aggressive touch between the black recruit and the white commanding officer highlights the ways in which colonialism imposed a rigid, hierarchical and racialised understanding of masculinity. Mbembe explains that colonialism constructed black bodies as objects of control, discipline, and subjugation:

> In the eyes of the settler, the native has no limits but his or her physical body. It is this body, these features, these muscles, that make up the sum total of the native's 'being'. The colonised's physiognomy is hard. Its forms are rough and angular, face broad, cheekbones salient, lips thick and wide. There is something wild and cruel about him/her. In short, the colonised subject is an embodiment. (2001, p.187)

If, as Mbembe argues above, the colonial imagination views the black body as wild and cruel, "Tell me your politik" challenges this imagination. In fact, the black bodies are framed as having the capacity to express and experience softness whilst the white body, exemplified by the commanding officer, is shown as the wild and cruel body. The relationship between the black and white bodies in this music video highlights black masculinity as something that is dominated. This, of course, parallels the historical positioning of black men as hypermasculine, dangerous, and in need of control by white authority figures. The white officer's aggressive touch—pulling, pushing, and manhandling the black recruit—can be seen to echo the policing of black bodies under colonialism and apartheid. It reflects what Fanon (2008) described as the "racial epidermal schema" and "affective tetanisation", where the black body is pathologised and reduced to an object of both violence and erotic fascination within the colonial gaze.

The violence that characterises racialised touch differs sharply from the tender and erotic touch between the black men. In the representation of black men engaged in intimacy, this video challenges not just hypermasculine posturing but also heteronormative and racialised constructions of what it means to be masculine. The vulnerability of the black men defies colonial imaginings of black men as either embodying the rough, wild and cruel masculinity that Mbembe evokes or them serving as submissive subjects to white colonial/apartheid power. The white commanding officer's contemptuous gaze and aggressive intrusion when the black man engages in a dance with a woman further emphasise how these racialised and gendered power dynamics play out. The commanding officer's interference demonstrates the discomfort that white masculinity has historically had with the autonomy of black masculine bodies and their sexuality. The closing shot of the video, of the commanding officer holding the black recruit's cheeks, can be read as encapsulating both erotic fascination and fear. It also highlights how colonial authorities attempted

to restrain any expressions of black male sexuality that did not conform to heteronormative and white colonial/apartheid standards. In fact, the commanding officer's need to reiterate power and authority through aggressive touch speaks to how colonial and white masculinities can often be built on insecurity and a fear of losing control over those they deem inferior. The fluidity of the black recruit's expressions of desire—across gender lines and forms of intimacy—stand in opposition to the rigid nature of white colonial masculinity.

By juxtaposing moments of tender queer intimate touch with scenes of aggressive racialised touch, Nakhane's "Tell me your politik" offers a vision of black masculinity that is at once fluid, multidimensional, and resistant to the colonial frameworks that seek to confine it. It thus invites a reconsideration of how race, masculinity, and queerness intersect, and how their intersections have been shaped by, and resist, colonial histories of violence and domination.

Conclusion

Through their bold, groundbreaking, and provocative music videos, Nakhane challenges societal norms and draws attention to the lived experiences of queer bodies. These videos explore how queer individuals encounter otherness, come into being through relationality, and navigate the world through embodied existence. The bodies captured in Nakhane's music videos are bodies that feel, bodies that touch, bodies that desire to be touched and bodies that have immense affective capabilities.

Nakhane's portrayal of touch, in the three music videos studied in this article, disrupts traditional understandings of masculinity in (South) African cultures by confronting the taboo surrounding same-sex intimacy, particularly between black men. The videos challenge the stoic, emotionally distant masculine ideal that is prevalent in many African cultural narratives and proposes instead depictions of masculinity that foreground tenderness, vulnerability, and physical proximity between men. The three music videos analysed in this article find and express power by foregrounding touch, embodiment, and affect, to envision worlds where queer bodies can exist authentically. Unabashedly, these videos project black queer bodies in their most vulnerable, intimate, and honest forms. The focus is on the intimacy of bodies in contact, bodies embracing one another, transcending constraints of sexual difference to revel in pleasures that engage the entirety of the body as the site of queer worldmaking. Nakhane's videos illustrate how touch is a central force in queer worldmaking, in imagining what Macharia terms "liveable and usable lives" for those existing outside heteronormative spaces.

Importantly, these videos reimagine illicit or taboo forms of touch as sites of resistance against sociocultural norms and practices which often seek to censor and suppress not just queer expressions of affection but also the expression of intimacy by men. Nakhane's centring of black queer bodies pushes back against social constraints and proposes alternative visions of love, desire, and identity. The boldness of these depictions aligns with other contemporary black queer South African artists like Majola, Toya Delazy (Ncube 2017) and Desire Marea who also use their music and music videos to defy heteronormativity and assert the legitimacy of queer African desire. Nakhane's contribution to black queer identities in contemporary music videos does not only align with these broader artistic efforts but also expands the discourse on how queer love and intimacy can be rethought and represented on-screen.

These compelling visual representations subvert dehumanising heteronormative discourses through the interplay of touch and embodied intimacy. The videos disrupt traditional power dynamics, reclaiming agency and autonomy over queer bodies and desires. They create a space where queer love, sensuality, and identity are celebrated rather than marginalised or erased. Through their uncompromising portrayal of queer embodiment, Nakhane's videos challenge societal perceptions, inviting viewers to confront their own biases and embrace the vast spectrum of human experience. In this, Nakhane's music videos are important cultural interventions which offer new and imaginative possibilities for how black queer lives, desires, and bodies can be seen and understood in both African and global contexts.

References

Allan, J. A. (2016). *Reading from behind. A cultural analysis of the anus*. London: Zed Books.

Asante, G. (2020). Decolonising the erotic: building alliances of (queer) African eros. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 43(2), pp.113-118.

Chengeta, G. (2022). Re-imagining how we want to be touched. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 34(2), pp.225-228.

Classen, C. (2012). *The deepest sense: A cultural history of touch*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.

Coetzee, C. (2019). *Written under the skin: blood and intergenerational memory in South Africa*. Suffolk: James Currey.

Connor, S. (2004). *The book of skin*. London: Reaktion Books.

Davis, A. K. (2015). Epiphenomenology of the closet: feeling and fashioning sexuality in everyday life. *Sexualities*, 18(8), pp.959-979.

Dlanga, K. (2014). Hold hands in friendship – and be proud to be an African. *Mail & Guardian* [online], December 3. Available from: https://mg.co.za/article/2014-12-03-hold-hands-in-friendship-and-be-proud-to-be-an-african/ [accessed 26 May 2024].

Fanon, F. (2008) [1967]. *Black skin, white masks*. New York: Grove Press.

Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Macharia, K. (2019). Frottage: Frictions of intimacy across the black diaspora. New York: New York University Press.

Manuel, Z. E. (2015). *The way of tenderness: awakening through race, sexuality, and gender*. London: Simon and Schuster.

Matebeni, Z. (2012). Queer(ing) porn – A conversation: Zethu Matebeni talks to Jabu C Pereira and Ignacio Rivera. *Agenda*, 26(3), pp.61-69.

Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Morris, C. E., and Sloop, J. M. (2006). What lips these lips have kissed: refiguring the politics of queer public kissing. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies,* 3(1), pp.1-26.

Nakayama, T. K., and Morris, C. E. (2015). Worldmaking and everyday interventions. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking,* 2, pp.v-viii.

Ncube, G. (2015). To Be Black, Christian and Gay: Nakhane Touré's *Brave Confusion*. *Muziki*, 12(2), pp.37-52.

Ncube, G. (2016). Deconstructing the closet: A sociological seading of Tendai Huchu's Novel, *The Hairdresser of Harare. South African Review of Sociology*, 47(3), pp.8-24.

Ncube, G. (2017). Guilty pleasures, forbidden fruits and brave confusion: queer love in the music and videos of South African singers Toya Delazy and Nakhane Toure. *Imbizo*, 8(1): pp.27-41.

Ncube, G. (2022). *Queer bodies in African films*. Makhanda: NISC.

Ndebele, N. S. (1986). The rediscovery of the ordinary: some new writings in South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12(2), pp.143-157.

Nyanzi, S. (2014). Queering queer Africa. In: Matebeni, Z., ed. *Reclaiming Afrikan: queer perspectives on sexual and gender identities*. Johannesburg: Modjaji Books, pp.61-66.

Nzegwu, N. U. (2012). *Family matters: feminist concepts in African philosophy of culture*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). *Touching feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Tallie, T. J. (2019). *Queering colonial natal: indigeneity and the violence of belonging in Southern Africa*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Tamale, S. (2011). Researching and Theorising Sexualities in Africa. In: Corrêa, S., de la Dehesa, R., and Parker, R., eds. *Sexuality and politics: regional dialogues from the Global South*, eds. Rio de Janeiro: Sexuality Policy Watch, pp.16-62.

VIDEOGRAPHY

Nakhane. (2014). In the dark room [video online]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Or6PmoX5BOM (accessed 12 March 2024)

Nakhane. (2017). Clairvoyant [video online]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucfuAffsljE (accessed 12 March 2024)

Nakhane. (2022). Tell me your politik [video online]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_Sa1crmEek (accessed 12 March 2024)