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SPECIAL ISSUE ON

Queer Africa: New Directions in Literature, Film, and Fashion

GUEST EDITORS

Gibson Ncube, Stellenbosch University

Andy Carolin, University of Johannesburg

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IN THIS ISSUE

The University of Johannesburg acquired *The Thinker* in April 2019 from Dr Essop Pahad. Over the last decade, *The Thinker* has gained a reputation as a journal that explores Pan-African issues across fields and times. Ronit Frenkel, as the incoming editor, plans on maintaining the pan-African scope of the journal while increasing its coverage into fields such as books, art, literature and popular cultures. *The Thinker* is a 'hybrid' journal, publishing both journalistic pieces with more academic articles and contributors can now opt to have their submissions peer reviewed. We welcome Africa-centred articles from diverse perspectives, in order to enrich both knowledge of the continent and of issues impacting the continent.

Prof Ronit Frenkel

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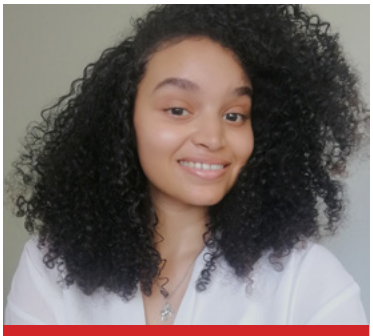

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Jarred Thompson is a literary and cultural studies researcher and educator and works as a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Pretoria. He was the winner of the 2020 Afritondo Prize, the runner-up in the 2021 Dream Foundry Prize and a finalist in Frontier Poetry's 2022 Global Poetry Prize for the Africa Region. His creative work has appeared in FIYAH, The Johannesburg Review of Books, Lolwe, Doek!, Omenana, Portside Review, Nightlight Horror Podcast and other publications. His play, *A History of Cake*, was selected as part of an anthology of new plays published through the University of Johannesburg (forthcoming). He's also been a 2022 Creative Writing Fellow at the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (JIAS). He has received several prestigious scholarships, including The Global Excellence and Stature Scholarship, The Chris Van Wyk Creative Writing Scholarship, two National Arts Council Grants, and a National Research Foundation New Generations of Academics Scholarship. His debut novel, *The Institute for Creative Dying* published in February 2023 through Picador Africa and Afritondo UK, won the University of Johannesburg debut prize for South African Writing in English. He is currently a PhD candidate in literary and cultural studies, with a research focus on positive affect/emotion as represented in South African popular culture. Email: *jarred.thompson@up.ac.za*

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Our Future. Reimagined.

FOREWORD

Queer Africa: New Directions in Literature, Film, and Fashion

By Guest Editors, Gibson Ncube, Stellenbosch University, and Andy Carolin, University of Johannesburg

The last decade has seen a proliferation in cultural productions that represent and narrativise queer lived experiences in Africa. Concomitantly, there has also been a growing body of scholarly work which has attempted to intellectualise these diverse cultural productions. However, as noted by Osinubi, "[w]ithin African queer scholarship, debates on good social practices concern the uneven constitution of the field and the responsibilities of scholars towards globally dispersed African communities" (2018, p.597). One of the most pressing challenges facing queer African studies has been this uneven constitution of the field, where much of the scholarship is produced by scholars who are either not African or are not based in Africa. Most of the scholars in the field are located in the Global North and work within institutions that have the capital to shape the production and dissemination of knowledge. What this does, in many instances, is to exclude or marginalise Africa-based scholars. This exclusion and marginalisation of African scholars, as Musila (2025) explains, is materialised in the way that scholarship from Africa and by African scholars is framed as belated. According to Musila, the "charge of belatedness is often framed in the diction of lack – lack of originality, lack of theoretical rigour, out of step with contemporary debates in the field of study, redundant" (2025, p.2). The marginalisation of African scholarship coupled with the geographical and institutional imbalance, we contend, raises important questions about the production

of knowledge, representation, and the politics of visibility in a field that sets out to centre African queer lives. When we put out the call for this special issue, we were particularly interested in creating a space in which African and Africa-based scholars could enter into conversation. Our goal was to foreground voices, narratives and experiences that are often sidelined. In so doing, this special issue sought not only to contribute to the expanding field of queer African studies but also to challenge the dominant narratives that perpetuate the marginalisation of Africa-based scholarship.

These questions on queer lived realities in Africa have come into sharp visibility lately in different parts of the continent. As the editors of this special issue, we felt that there was something striking about this moment in the history of queer rights and advocacy in Africa, and we wanted to explore the various ways in which different contexts on the continent shape practices of narration, representation, and world-making. We were interested in how a wide gamut of practices and discourses that operate under a rubric of queer – such as resistance, resilience, identity, and desire – contribute to the forms of cultural work being produced. At the time of writing, we see different countries on the continent taking vastly different positions on queer rights, moving in often diametrically opposed directions in relation to non-heteronormative sexualities and non-binary gender identities, irrespective of whether these exist under the language of queer, nomenclatures of LGBTQ+, or some other designation. These different positionings give effect to what Gevisser (2020) calls "the pink line" which, he argues, marks the global divisions in how both political and public sentiment towards queer rights are concretising in vastly different ways. Notably in this regard, even as countries such as Namibia, Mauritius and Botswana have seen legislative and judicial reforms that better protect LGBTQ+ rights, countries such as Ghana, Uganda and Mali are seeing the intensification of institutionalised homophobia and the violent policing of cisgender normativity. Of course, there is nothing exceptional about Africa in this regard, as similarly divergent trends can be seen across the world, with the recent election of Donald Trump in the United States being a harbinger of new forms of oppression and victimisation in the West.

But while the conflicting positions on LGBTQ+ rights have generated a wide plethora of literary and cultural works that depict multiple discursive sites of contestation and celebration, we, the editors, felt that a narrow focus on African cultural production might offer us some distinctly localised ways in which local contexts and discourses blend with (or work against) global cultural flows. What we intended for this special issue was a collation of new insights about cultural work that has been produced over the past decade that is coterminous with the increasingly fractured approach to LGBTQ+ rights on the continent.

Something that runs through all the articles in the collection is a careful attentiveness to questions of narrative form and genre itself. This marks a subtle shift away from the sometimes-disquieting inclination within cultural studies to treat literary and cultural texts as mere 'sociological' records of the discourses that emanate from a specific political context, a mode in which texts are separated from their specific aesthetic features. Instead, all the articles included in this special issue pay close attention to the specific narrative, cinematic, and/or broadly aesthetic features of specific texts. The special issue covers the short story form (Hall), the novel (Mbokazi and Graham; Mushwana), film (Mbokazi and Graham; Carolin), music videos (Ncube), and fashion (Mchunu and Negedu).

Literary fiction is the focus of the first three articles included in this special issue. The special issue opens with Leila Hall's bold and provocative reading of queer childhood in two short stories. Her comparative analysis of a South African and Kenyan short story demonstrates how fiction can respond to and rework pervasive discourses that situate sexuality in childhood within manufactured moral panics and threats of perversity and abuse. She argues that "the stories demonstrate how a 'childlike' way of relating to others and to the world–guided by instinct, relationality, and defiance–can act as an important counterpoint to the divisiveness and repression of socially constructed norms that include heteronormative ideals". Hall's analyses of the two short stories pay careful attention to focalisation as a narratological tool in order to show the analytical potential of queer childhoods.

The second article in the special issue is by Ntokozo Mbokazi and Lucy Graham. They offer a (re)reading

of *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba (The Wound)*, a novel and a film, respectively, that have a pre-eminent status within the South African queer literary and filmic canon. Key to their analysis is the relationship between space and Africanness within the narrative trajectory of the *Bildungs*. They argue, in this regard, that "as narratives of development and initiation, these two texts meditate on the possibilities of queer Black bodies being integrated into communities in post-apartheid South Africa".

Wisani Mushwana's fine contribution to the special issue focuses on Chinelo Okparanta's novel *Under the Udala Trees*. The article explores the relationship between particular renderings of fundamentalist Christianity and the discursive reproduction of heteronormativity and patriarchy. Mushwana argues that the novel is "a creative output aware of the shame inherent in Christianity's conceptual resources and ways in which it is wielded to stifle the expressions of queer subjectivities". Mushwana's analysis is closely tied to the tension between imposed shame and queer resistance. The article also signals a wider conceptualisation of trauma that recognises the practices of inclusion and exclusion that are fomented through religious fundamentalism.

The focus of the special issue moves to film in Andy Carolin's contribution on melodrama in South African queer films. He argues that close attention to the specific aesthetic features of melodrama as a narrative genre might open up new ways of thinking about the cultural politics surrounding queer representation. His article focuses on *Kanarie*, a film that has received considerable scholarly attention, and *Runs in the Family*, a film that has been wholly neglected by literary scholars, as he explores the tensions between a radical queer futurity and a more conservatively framed assimilationism.

Gibson Ncube's article focuses on three music videos by South African multimodal performer Nakhane. The article is theoretically astute, and blends work by Steven Connor, Carli Coetzee and Keguro Macharia to argue that "skin [is] an expressive screen [that] serves as a canvas on which queer affect and touch are negotiated and performed". The article draws our attention to the ways in which touch can function symbolically as a way through which queer bodies can resist the dehumanisation and desexualisation that so often accompany heteronormativity.

Next, Khaya Mchunu and Isaiah Negedu's insightful study zeroes in on the queer implications of a specific Nigerian fashion brand, The Lagos Space Programme. They innovatively draw on social media site Instragram as a site of articulation. Through an analysis of specific imagery, films, design statements and interviews with its creative director, Mchunu and Negedu powerfully show how a specific fashion brand that employs distinctly Lagosian and Yoruba cultural and aesthetic elements and cultural references can demonstrate how "maleness and masculinity are not antithetical to queerness" within Africa.

The special issue includes Jarred Thompson's insightful review of Gibson Ncube's monograph *Queer Bodies in African Films*.

Some of the articles offer fresh and provocative angles on texts and films that have previously been extensively analysed. These include texts like *Under the Udala Trees*, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, and the film *Inxeba* (*The Wound*). While these works have received substantial scholarly attention, the contributors to this special issue revisit them with novel views that enrich and complicate existing interpretations. What this does is demonstrate that even widely discussed texts can yield newfound insights when approached through innovative frameworks or when read alongside underexplored cultural phenomena. As such, the special issue not only deepens engagement with these canonical texts but also challenges the field to broaden its thematic and methodological horizons.

When we first made the call for papers for this special issue, we were interested in articles that would shine light on the rich and dynamic cultural production that explores and subverts conventional narratives and adds to the continuing conversation about queer representation and visibility by highlighting the various ways queer identities are portrayed across the continent. It was our hope that the call for papers would attract studies that would showcase the various ways that queer voices from different parts of the African continent are redefining and reshaping the cultural landscape by considering how queerness intersects with and is expressed in fiction, film, music, fashion and many other

artistic expressions. The articles that we ended up receiving focused on countries that continue to dominate studies on African queerness: South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. It might certainly be argued that these articles, read as a corpus, unwittingly reproduce the geographic and linguistic divisions that have characterised queer African studies and African studies more broadly. Such division, as argued by Ncube (2022), has had the effect of reproducing colonial demarcations of African spaces and cultures. Scholars focusing on Anglophone, Arabophone, Francophone, or Lusophone Africa often work in isolation from each other, with little or no dialogue or collaboration across linguistic boundaries. Such fragmentation limits, in many ways, the development of what van Klinken (2020) terms a truly "pan-African queer" studies framework. The special issue is largely Anglophone in its scope and focuses on a region of the continent contentiously named "sub-Saharan" Africa. While it is perhaps not uncommon for literary and cultural work from some countries to be over-represented in analytical accounts of Anglophone African queer literature and film, we were struck by the ongoing absence of articles that might focus on cultural work being produced elsewhere on the continent.

Despite the special issue's scope, it makes important interventions that push the boundaries of Queer African studies. Importantly, it engages with issues such as fashion, melodrama, and music videos which are cultural forms that rarely figure in the field of queer African studies. These areas of scholarship expand the horizons of queer African studies beyond its conventional textual and activist focus and open up new possibilities for making sense of the intersections of queerness with popular culture and everyday life.

It is our hope that future edited collections are heedful to cultural works from a far wider range of countries and regions on the African continent.

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Seeing Differently, Seeing Anew: The Strategic Use of Young Girl Narrators/Focalisers in Recent Queer African Short Fiction

By Leila Hall

Abstract

With a focus on two recent queer-themed short stories from Kenya and South Africa, this article considers how the use of a child focaliser in fictional representations of early experiences of same-sex desire can disrupt and subvert ideals of childhood 'innocence' and the problematic conflation of paedophilia with same-sex sexuality. The two stories discussed in this article – Idza Luhumyo's "Nine Pieces of Desire" (2017) and Kharys Laue's "Plums" (2018) – importantly narrate childhood experiences of same-sex sexuality that are not associated with paedophilia or sexual abuse, but that rather focus on young protagonists' experiences of the restrictiveness and violence associated with hetero-patriarchal norms. The article argues that the stories eschew the simplistic binary of innocent children/perverse homosexuals in two important ways. Firstly, the stories re-frame the notion of same-sex sexuality itself as 'perverse' and violent by instead locating violence and repression within the hetero-patriarchal norms that are ostensibly meant to protect children from harm. Secondly, through the use of complex characterisation and the unabashed depiction of childhood sexuality, the stories implicitly challenge the ideal of childhood 'innocence': an ideal which is central to discourses and constructs that diametrically oppose 'innocent children' with 'perverse homosexuals'. The article also explores how the use of a child's perspective can help us to see socially constructed adult norms 'anew'. In contrast with the delimitations and divisiveness of hetero-patriarchy and its interconnected systems of power, the stories' young focalisers represent instinct, defiance, and relationality: qualities and alternative points of view that could have wider implications for debates surrounding same-sex sexualities in contemporary African contexts.

Introduction

This article discusses the innovative use of a young girl narrator/focaliser in two contemporary queer-themed African short stories: "Nine Pieces of Desire" (2017) by Kenyan writer Idza Luhumyo and "Plums" (2018) by South African writer Kharys Laue. Importantly, both of these stories portray childhood experiences of same-sex sexuality which are entirely disentangled from any form of sexual abuse at the hands of an adult. Instead, the stories narrate an early experience of a consensual same-sex encounter with a peer and the severe reprimanding and castigation that follow this. As told through the eyes of a young focaliser, the stories compel us to see socially constructed adult norms in a new and surprising light: an effective means of critiquing heteronormativity and its associated systems of power. In doing this, and in reframing the very concept of childhood 'innocence', the stories invert the problematic binary of innocent children/perverse homosexuals. Rather than representing same-sex sexuality as being forcibly imposed on children, the stories demonstrate how the more real and immediate threats that their young protagonists face are the systems of power and repression into which they are being inculcated. Patriarchy, dogmatic religion, and racism are represented in the stories as intertwined with heteronormativity, and these interconnected systems of power are shown to be overwhelmingly divisive and oppressive: the polar opposites of the possibilities of relationality and defiance that the young girl protagonists represent. By extension, what the stories critique is not the danger or 'perversity' of same-sex sexuality, but rather the harmful effects of the socially constructed norms that govern the lives of their young protagonists.

Problematic entanglements: The conflation of paedophilia with same-sex sexuality in African public discourses and literary representations

In politicised queerphobic discourses in many contemporary African contexts, same-sex sexuality and paedophilia are frequently dangerously conflated, with innocent children framed in binary opposition to perverse and predatory homosexuals. This problematic conflation was demonstrated in the parliamentary debates that led to the passing

> "…the stories re-frame the notion of same-sex sexuality itself as 'perverse' and violent by instead locating violence and repression within the hetero-patriarchal norms that are ostensibly meant to protect children from harm."

of Uganda's 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act.[1] In these debates, several Ugandan MPs made sweeping statements about the societal dangers posed by 'homosexuals' and in doing so notably drew no distinction between the sexual abuse of minors and same-sex relations between consenting adults. In advocating for the need for the Anti-Homosexuality Act, for instance, Ugandan MP Musa Ecweru in March 2023 spoke of his visits to "some hospitals" in the country, where he claimed he had witnessed "children with ripped anuses" who "[had] been molested by homosexuals" (Opio 2023). Rather than campaigning for specific legislation that would protect minors from sexual abuse, however, Ugandan MPs instead voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, which broadly seeks "to prohibit any form of sexual relations between persons of the same sex" (Refworld 2023). In a single Act, consensual adult relations, same-sex marriages, the "promotion of homosexuality", and "child grooming" (Refworld 2023) are all criminalised in one fell swoop. Throughout the Act, the insinuation that *all* "homosexuals" pose an inherent threat to children is made clear, as seen in

Section 12, for instance, which specifies that anybody convicted of "the offence of homosexuality…shall be disqualified from employment in a child care institution" (Refworld 2023).

Contemporary African literary studies indicate that fictional portrayals of same-sex sexuality in African literature are also often problematically entangled with depictions of paedophilia. Munro, for instance, has written about the centrality of same-sex sexual violence in Nigerian child soldier novels such as Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) and Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007). In these novels, boy soldiers are sexually violated by older male military commanders and then go on to become perpetrators of sexual violence themselves. Boy soldier protagonists in these novels are thus frequently represented as "stigmatized subject[s]" and the overwhelming concern of many of the novels' narrative arcs is "how to absolve, rescue, or normalize this figure" (Munro 2016, p.122). The novels' portrayals of male same-sex sexuality thus rest on a dangerously simplistic "innocence/perversity axis" (Munro 2016, p.133). Given the relative paucity of positive depictions of male same-sex sexuality in Nigerian cultural production, Munro writes of how the novels risk conflating portrayals of sexual violence against children with consensual male same-sex adult relationships. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's ideas of the "stickiness" of cultural emotions, the notion that particular affects and associations can become "stuck" to certain signs and objects, Munro contends that Iweala's graphic representation of the sexual violation of boys in *Beasts of No Nation* runs the danger of becoming "particularly 'sticky,' in Ahmed's sense, so that same-sex sexuality is tarred by it" (2016, p.131), configuring "male-male perversity in a manner that potentially 'sticks to' the nascent gay Nigerian subject" (2016, p.125).

In South African literature, portrayals of paedophilia are frequently read as symbolic of the horrors and failures of both the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Munro interprets K. Sello Duiker's post-apartheid novel *Thirteen Cents* (2000), which harrowingly narrates its thirteen-year-old narrator's precarious survival through male-male sex work in Cape Town, as an "un-coming-out novel and a rebuke to the failures of South African nationalism" (2012, p.198). Stobie, meanwhile, reads Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1993) as a complex metaphor for the hypocrisies and "fissures" of apartheid (2008, p.70). For Stobie, *The Smell of Apples*, told through the eyes of eleven-year-old Erasmus, effectively critiques the "absolute binarism" (2008, p.70) of apartheid through its depiction of the "interstitial, scandalous figure of the bisexual" (2008, p.75), embodied by Marnus's revered father, who falls from grace in his son's eyes after the latter witnesses him raping his best friend and classmate. Tellingly, however, Stobie's analysis frequently fails to make a distinction between "bisexuality" as a sexual orientation and identity which designates (adult, consensual) relations with both men and women, and paedophilia as a quite separate harmful and abusive practice. In Stobie's reading, and in her eagerness to analyse the novel metaphorically, the two are often conflated, so that Marnus's father is not interpreted solely as a sexual predator who uses his position of authority to sexually molest a child, but rather is read as "an adult, pedophile, bisexual figure" (2008, p.71): a problematic conglomeration of disparate identities and practices. In African literary criticism, too, then – as in African literary works – we can discern the "stickiness" to which Munro refers: a problematic entanglement between representations of same-sex sexuality, childhood, and the darker spectres of rape and paedophilia.

Seeing differently: Inverting the "innocence/perversity axis" and seeing social constructions anew through a young narrator's eyes

In focalising their stories through young girl protagonists, Luhumyo and Laue join a rich tradition in African literature in which child narrators have frequently been used as a means of shedding new light on socio-political issues and offering alternative insights and possibilities in the face of the seemingly intractable rigidities of the status quo (Hron 2008; Mann 2012; Wilkinson 2016). The authors also join a small but growing archive of African fiction that focuses on early experiences of mutual and consensual same-sex desire as told through the eyes of young narrators. In the novel *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), for instance, Chinelo Okparanta narrates the coming-of-age story of her young Igbo protagonist, Ijeoma, who falls in love with a Hausa girl, Amina, during Nigeria's civil war (1967–70), offering an original "Nigerian lesbian

Bildungsroman" (Courtois 2018, p.120). The novel is notable not only for its complex exploration of sexual, ethnic, and national identities in the Nigerian context, but also for its candid and unabashed descriptions of female same-sex sexuality. Similarly, Monica Arac de Nyeko's short story "Jambula Tree" (2008) focuses on an early experience of same-sex desire between two teenage Ugandan girls, Anyango and Sanyu, who are 'caught' during a moment of intimacy and subsequently shamed by their prying neighbour, Mama Atim. Whereas Mama Atim represents the "noisy, gossiping and frightening housewives" that Anyango and Sanyu vow to never "become" (Arac de Nyeko 2013, p.92), the teenage girls' defiant romance is representative of a "hope" that transcends their narrow and delimited hetero-patriarchal context. Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu builds on the affect of hope in her film *Rafiki* (2018), a queer romantic drama that narrates a love story between two Kenyan teenagers that is explicitly inspired by Arac de Nyeko's story (Green-Simms 2019).

> "Contemporary African literary studies indicate that fictional portrayals of same-sex sexuality in African literature are also often problematically entangled with depictions of paedophilia."

Luhumyo's "Nine Pieces of Desire" (2017) and Laue's "Plums" (2018) extend on this existing archive of fictional narrations of young girl protagonists who share an early experience of same-sex desire in contemporary African contexts. Following Okparanta and Arac de Nyeko's approach, Luhumyo's and Laue's stories notably describe their young protagonists' first experiences of queer desire as guided only by mutual instinct and pleasure, rather than by any form of coercion or 'perversity' at the hands of an adult. To borrow Ahmed's and Munro's terminology, the stories therefore effectively "unstick" representations of same-sex sexuality and childhood from paedophilia and abuse. In this way, the perspectives that the stories present move away from the "innocence/perversity axis" which Munro writes of and, by extension, from the problematic binary of innocent children/perverse homosexuals. Rather than representing same-sex sexuality as violent or threatening, the stories instead locate violence and repression within the socially constructed hetero-patriarchal norms that are purportedly meant to shield and protect children.

The stories also invert the simplistic binary of innocent children/perverse homosexuals through their implicit reframing of the very concept of childhood 'innocence'. As contrasted with Okparanta's protagonists, who are twelve and thirteen when they have their first same-sex encounter, and with Arac de Nyeko's teenage characters, who are both in high school, Luhumyo's and Laue's stories are set more firmly in the realm of *childhood*: Luhumyo's narrator is only ten, and although Laue does not specify her child protagonists' ages, they are both described as small enough to be physically picked up by their mothers in the acts of violent reprimanding that follow the discovery of their transgression. Luhumyo's and Laue's narrators' perspectives are also definitively *childlike*, as I will go on to expand below. This specific focus on queer desire in childhood is important. Rather than narrating the movement from "the innocence of childhood to the experience of adulthood" (Stobie 2008, p.70), as seen in Behr's *The Smell of Apples*, or being concerned with how to "recover" childhood innocence, as in the Nigerian child soldier novels that Munro discusses, Luhumyo's and Laue's stories characterise their child protagonists as complex, contradictory, and not necessarily 'innocent' at all. This narrative choice can be read alongside the work of Kathryn Stockton, who analyses representations of 'queer' children (an adjective

which she uses in its broadest sense) in a range of twentieth-century literary and cultural texts. Stockton (2009, p.17) argues that fictional works reveal to us "versions of children that both histories and childhood studies have underrecognised, oddly conceptualised, or not even seen". As opposed to the concept of 'innocent' children (an ideal which she reminds us is not universal, but specific to the last few centuries of Western culture), Stockton (2009, p.3) is concerned with illuminating the "pain, closets, emotional labours, sexual motives, and sideways movements that attend all children". This, as she explains, is important because the ideal of childhood 'innocence' is in itself interlinked with violence. Drawing on the work of theorists like James Kincaid, who has shown that the concept of "innocence" in childhood is too often problematically viewed as "titillating", Stockton (2009, p.12) highlights the "peculiar dangers" that accompany constructions of childhood innocence. She also reminds us that conservative Americans who juxtapose "children" with "homosexuals" inadvertently join the two ideas, making "the concept of homosexuality central to the meaning of the children they embrace" (Stockton 2009, p.3). The same can be said, in inverse, of the discourses and justifications surrounding Uganda's 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act: in conflating same-sex sexuality with paedophilia, and in insinuating that *all* 'homosexuals' pose an inherent threat to children, the concept of 'innocent' children becomes fundamental to the construction of dangerous and perverse homosexuals. Through their complex characterisation of their young girl protagonists, Luhumyo and Laue compel us to rethink the concept of childhood 'innocence', even as they present the perspectives of their young focalisers as representative of possibilities and points of view which contrast with the divisiveness and repression of adult social norms.

"Nine Pieces of Desire" (2017)

Idza Luhumyo's "Nine Pieces of Desire" (2017) is set on the Kenyan coast in a Muslim community. Through the eyes of ten-year-old Mariam, the story shows us how heteronormativity, patriarchal structures, and Islamic dogmatism are inextricably intertwined and equally oppressive for women. As a young and impressionable narrator, Mariam closely observes her mother, "Ma", and her grandmother,

> "Mariam's observations reveal how the lives of the women in her family are constricted, stifled, and relegated largely to domestic spaces."

"Bibi", who are characterised as restricted in terms of their bodily autonomy and self-expression. Both Ma and Bibi are grappling with grief, as Mariam's sister, Latifa, died when she was only three years old, while Bibi's husband and sons have disappeared after going to Dubai in search of work. The women's expression of their grief, however, is largely silent. As Mariam observes: "Mama doesn't like tears. She prefers her sorrow dry" (2017, p.266). This emphasis on silence and what is deemed acceptable behaviour for women repeats itself throughout the story and is closely intertwined with what is considered "haram" [forbidden] by Islam. Mariam notes that "everything" is "haram" to her mother, including "[l]aughing loudly" (2017, p.265). In an essay on the interconnections between silence and patriarchal oppression in Kenya, Gatwiri and Mumbi write that:

> From a young age, women are socialised to be averse to intellectual or authoritative expressions, especially around men, and are encouraged to stay silent as a show of respect and recognition of male superiority... In many ethnic groups, the term 'woman' in vernacular is interpreted to mean 'the silent one', referring to one who stays mute in the presence of men but also in respect to any negative goings on around her. (2016, p.14)

The notion of women remaining "mute" in the face of "negative goings on" is depicted throughout the story, as is the key point that this is behaviour that women are "socialised" into. Mariam copies what she observes in her mother and grandmother,

telling the reader that she "has perfected the art of quietly doing things" (2017, p.265): of "cry[ing] quietly" (2017, p.266), of "learn[ing]…how not to lose myself to laughter" (2017, p.263), and of "approach[ing] happiness with the stealth that Ma and Bibi approached it with" (2017, p.264).

What appears to be a "given" in Ma's and Bibi's adult world is seen anew through Mariam's eyes. As Wilkinson writes, child narrators are able "to challenge practices and values that have become accepted features of society… by exposing their constructed nature, and demonstrating the potential for alternate ways of thinking and being" (2016, p.125). Mariam's observations reveal how the lives of the women in her family are constricted, stifled, and relegated largely to domestic spaces. She notes that "Bibi's bath is an event in her day. Sometimes I think it is all she looks forward to" (2017, p.268). Bibi's room, meanwhile, is described as steeped in "darkness", a space that shuts out the exterior world: "You would not guess that the sun shines in its entire splendour just beyond the curtains" (2017, p.270). Mariam also observes that "Ma barely lives" (2017, p.263) and that she spends her afternoons "reading her Quran until the shadows on the walls have disappeared" (2017, p.266). This religious devoutness, however, is not only depicted as intertwined with patriarchal oppression, but also with the assumption of a moral superiority which is closely interlinked with class divisions. Bibi and Ma are suspicious of the tenants who live in the rooms adjoining their house, tenants who Ma claims "touch, cook, and eat pork all the time" (2017, p.266), and whom she has consequently forbidden Mariam from visiting.

As contrasted with the narrow delimitations and divisions of the adult world, Mariam's perspective makes room for defiance and possibility. Although Mariam is portrayed as a young narrator who is keen to please her elders and who is learning to copy their behaviour, her small acts of rebellion are also highlighted. As contrasted with Ma and Bibi's religious devoutness, Mariam admits to the reader that she is sometimes "lazy" and at times "forgets" to say her daily prayers (2017, p.265). Despite Ma's interdiction, Mariam also frequently "sneak[s] away in the afternoons" to go and visit the tenants, as this is the family of her friend, Grace (2017, p.266). Mariam has deduced for herself that Ma's claims of Grace's family eating pork are "a lie", as Grace has told her that they "only eat cow meat and even then only on the last Sunday of every month" (2017, p.266). Mariam's and Grace's friendship is, therefore, representative of the possibility of relationality and perspectives that differ from the divisiveness and assumptions of moral superiority that can accompany some forms of religious dogmatism.

One afternoon, the two girls take a walk, escaping the confinement of the domestic realm, to the place where Mariam usually goes for her "madrasa classes" (2017, p.268): her Islamic religious education. The madrasa compound is deserted except for three boys who are playing marbles, one of whom "is screaming, 'Haram! Haram!' incessantly as if he were rehearsing a chant" (2017, p.268). The theme of surveillance and of women's bodily autonomy being consistently monitored and appraised – a theme which repeats itself throughout the story – is clear in this admonition, and is echoed by Mariam's hesitance to enter the building for fear of being "seen by the Imam" (2017, p.268). The two girls do enter the madrasa classroom, however, and it is in here that they experience a brief and intense moment of same-sex desire. Luhumyo's description of this moment provides important insight into the nuances and paradoxes of childhood sexuality: while the girls' experience is framed as taking place outside of the knowledge and language of the adult world, this experience is simultaneously represented in a way that eschews the concept of childhood sexual 'innocence'. In line with Stockton's arguments on the importance of rebutting cultural insistences on childhood innocence, the story suggests some of the "unfathomable, hazy motives" that "drive the motions of [children's] bodies, motions that can look like sex, seduction, delinquency" (Stockton 2009, p.5). As the girls sit down cross-legged on the madrasa classroom floor, Grace teases Mariam, asking "Is this how you usually sit? … So that the boys get a little glimpse of your thing?" (2017, p.268). The girls' awareness of the sexualised male gaze is clear, but so is the way in which they use simple and 'childish' language ("your thing") to reference sexual anatomy. Mariam's description of their brief same-sex encounter similarly emphasises a child's language and perspective:

> …she brings her bent knee slowly, slowly as far as it can go between my legs… Her gaze holds me captive so that I am both here and not

> here... she is now moving her knee further in with the urgency of someone who really needs to pee... I find myself opening my legs further apart, keenly aware of a thrill that is building up in my middle part. I surprise myself by sighing when Grace's knee goes just short of grazing my panty. I move my body slightly nearer her and push my legs further apart. Grace gets up, scans the room quickly, and gets on top of me. (2017, p.269)

Notably, adult language and concepts such as "sex" or "lesbian" are missing in this description, and the urgency of sexual desire is described as "needing to pee": the most readily available reference in the framework of the young narrator's perspective. Despite being represented as happening outside of an adult's language and knowledge base, however, the girls' mutual feelings of sexual desire and pleasure are clearly emphasised. Mariam also notably describes her own bodily reactions as happening in spite of herself ("I find myself"; "I surprise myself"): as guided by instinct rather than by conscious thought or any form of coercion.

This moment of discovery and pleasure is short-lived, however, and what follows is a swift castigation of the girls' actions. No sooner has Grace climbed on top of Mariam than they hear "the sound of laughter coming from the windows" and realise that they have been seen (2017, p.269). The girls know enough to sense that what they have done is 'wrong' and they walk home in a self-imposed silence. The next day, Mariam finds herself once again confined to the domestic realm, "bored and looking out of the window", while the Imam stops by to tell Bibi about the girls' transgression (2017, p.270). Afterwards, Bibi calls Mariam to her room and – at first without directly naming or addressing the offence itself – reprimands her:

> If there is one thing I have learnt when bringing up girls, it is to watch them very, very closely... when Allah created humans, he had ten pieces of desire in His hand. He gave nine pieces to women and only one piece to men. My mother's sister, Aunty Khadijah, once told me something important about girls. She said there is a certain age in a girl's life when she has to be protected from other girls. At that age, the company of other girls is dangerous. There is a type of madness that moves around in their bodies like blood, and they pass it on to each other like a disease. (2017, pp.270-271)

Buttressed by religious teachings, Bibi's admonition reiterates damaging and reductive tropes about African women's sexualities as "lascivious" (Tamale 2011, p.15) and immoral. Although she eventually names the transgression, Bibi begins by circling around it, using the story about the ten pieces of desire to make her meaning understood through allegory and implication. After the admonition, Bibi "goes silent for a long while" and Mariam "realise[s] that she is using the silence as a weapon" (2017, p.271). This notably points to how silence itself can function as a central aspect of patriarchal oppression. As Marais (2019, p.91) notes, "speaking about sex or sexual pleasure remains culturally taboo" for many African women and this "sexual silence...subsequently supports ideologies of shame and stigma". Female sexual pleasure in general, including heteronormative sexual pleasure, remains "an unspeakable topic" (Marais 2019, p.91) in numerous African contexts. Same-sex desire between two women, then, constitutes a double transgression, an especially "unspeakable" taboo. In the story that Bibi tells Mariam about the ten pieces of desire, female same-sex sexuality in particular is pathologized as "dangerous", "a type of madness", and a "disease" (2017, p.271).

In offering a subtle critique of religious hetero-patriarchal oppression, Luhumyo makes use of the disjuncture between the limitations of her young narrator's perspective and the details and inferences available to an adult reader. This disjuncture allows "a double reading for the adult to read between the lines and see things that the child sees but may not as yet fully understand" (Mann 2012, p.340). In "Nine Pieces", there are several moments when Mariam only seems to possess a half-understanding of what is happening around her, so that we as readers are left to deduce what is being implied. Throughout the story, the character of Grace is representative of transgression and of the possibility of thinking and behaving outside of the confines of religious and hetero-patriarchal social norms. Mariam thinks that Grace reminds her of an image she saw on her teacher's phone, of a "neck" with "three heads sitting on it" (2017, p.267). She asks her teacher if this image represents a "jinni": a shape-shifting spirit from Arabic mythology. Her teacher replies that "[i]f it is a jinni then we must all be jinnis...We all have many sides to us" (2017, p.267). Revealing her

child's perspective, Mariam thinks that she "[does] not understand" what her teacher means, but to us as readers the implications of this moment are clear (2017, p.267). The teacher's comments gesture towards the fallaciousness of clear-cut good/evil and right/wrong binaries: pointing instead to the multiplicity of human experiences and identities, and thus offering an implicit critique of the rigidity of religious hetero-patriarchal prescriptions.

Finally, Luhumyo develops an extended metaphor at the end of the story which implies the absurdity of the pathologisation of same-sex desire. Just before she is called to Bibi's room to be reprimanded, Mariam remembers a dog that the family used to own:

> There used to be a dog I would play with, a dog Baba had... After a while they said it had rabies and that it had to be killed. Baba said that the dog had bitten one of the tenants and because of that bite the tenant might die. The dog had to go. (2017, p.270)

After Bibi's admonition, Mariam finds herself "[f]or some reason" thinking again about this dog (2017, p.271). She tells us that "[a]fter it was killed, everyone waited for the tenant to die", but ultimately the tenant "never died" and it "seemed that the dog had never had rabies in the first place" (2017, p.271). Although Mariam is unable to articulate why this memory comes to mind at the very instance of Bibi's admonition, we can deduce the implied connections between the incorrect diagnosis of rabies, the dog's needless death, and the ways in which Bibi pathologizes and castigates Mariam's actions. This is emphasised in the ways in which, as already noted, Bibi speaks of female same-sex desire as a "disease" and "type of madness" (2017, p.271). Luhumyo underscores the futility and destructiveness of such pathologisation, which resonates with the story's broader critique of religious hetero-patriarchal power. Notably, in the last paragraph of the story, Luhumyo also implies a *refusal* of silence by her narrator. As contrasted with her mother's silent and silenced grief, Mariam realises that she is "incapable of keeping [her] sorrow dry" and instead "break[s] out into loud sobs", in spite of Bibi's "shocked" reaction (2017, p.271). In the story's final paragraph, then, Luhomyo offers us the subtlest hint of the possibility that Mariam will come to think critically of the religious hetero-patriarchal systems of oppression in which she is being raised.

"Plums" (2018)

Whereas "Nine Pieces" is told entirely in the first-person present tense by ten-year-old Mariam, Kharys Laue's "Plums" (2018) is split into two timeframes: the present-tense perspective of the story's adult narrator, Chris, and the past-tense memories of Chris's childhood on a South African farm. The story is therefore at first glance told from the perspective of an adult narrator, but it is important to highlight that this narrator focalises her recollections of the past through the perspective of a young girl, so that we as readers experience the events of Chris's childhood much as a child would have. A childlike point of view also permeates Chris's present-tense adult perspective, which recounts her experience of postpartum depression and her overall inability to adjust to the demands of motherhood and adulthood. Whereas the past-tense narration offers a critique of the overlaps between racism and heteronormativity as seen through a young focaliser's eyes, the present-tense narration critiques these same systems of power through the portrayal of a way of seeing and being that ultimately refuses to conform to prescribed 'adult' norms and behaviours.

In the narration of Chris's childhood past, Laue

"...but it is important to highlight that this narrator focalises her recollections of the past through the perspective of a young girl, so that we as readers experience the events of Chris's childhood much as a child would have."

uses a child's perspective to demonstrate the interconnections between heteronormativity and racism in twentieth- and twenty-first-century South Africa. The timeframe of Chris's memories is not specified, but a reader could reasonably assume – given the overt racism depicted in the story and the timeline of its publication – that the past tense narration of her childhood is set during apartheid. While South Africa's post-apartheid era has been marked by the most progressive legislation of same-sex rights on the continent, it is important to remember that the apartheid era was defined not only by the state's policing of racialised divisions, but also by the "policing of interracial sex, and a strict, indeed militarised regime of heteronormative whiteness" (Munro 2012, p.xii). Although "Plums" gradually reveals the rigidities and violence of these hetero-patriarchal and racist norms, the story begins by portraying a child's perspective that starkly contrasts with these. In the narration of her childhood memories, Chris recounts an afternoon that she spent with Gloria: her friend, agemate, and the daughter of her family's Black domestic worker. In spite of the racialised divisions that defined the society in which she grew up, Chris describes her childhood friendship with Gloria as joyful, carefree, and characterised by understanding and relationality. The two girls have spent their afternoon "plunder[ing]" (2018, p.50) the farm's plum tree orchard and when Chris tells Gloria that she has a "secret" to show her at the house, they run there together, laughing and holding hands. Their childhood perspective is revealed in this easy closeness (Chris nicknames Gloria "Glo"); in their instinctive awareness of and relationship with the natural world (Chris is acutely aware of the "wind" in her face and the "cicada-song" in her ears); and in the emphasis on the immediate and the sensory ("the low lazy sunlight", "the soft insides of plums") (2018, pp.50-51).

As in "Nine Pieces", "Plums" complicates the notion of childhood 'innocence' even as it presents a child's perspective that is differentiated from the realms of adult language, knowledge, and social norms. After climbing into the "secret" space that Chris has found, a loft in the ceiling, the girls build a "makeshift tent": "a semicircle of hay bales" covered with "a red sheet fetched from the room below" (2018, p.52). Their tent represents a reality that is separate from the divisive adult norms that surround them: "This is *our* place" (2018, p.52) Gloria whispers to Chris, her use of the plural possessive pronoun emphasising a shared space where white and Black coexist easily. The image of an alternate childhood reality is underscored by Laue's descriptions of the tent as resembling a womb: as bathed in an "embryonic light", "sheathed snug in an envelope of heat", with the air characterised by a "liquid stillness" and the red sheet described as "a soft skin stretched over us" (2018, p.52). This "embryonic" state, however, is paradoxically not a space of 'innocence', as it is in their makeshift tent that Chris and Gloria experience their first same-sex encounter. As with Mariam's account in "Nine Pieces", it is striking to note here how the description of this encounter, focalised through the eyes of young Chris, highlights instinctive curiosity and bodily pleasure as taking place outside of the adult frameworks of morality, language, or knowledge. Slowly and wordlessly, as if in a "subaqueous dance" (2018, p.53), the girls undress and are drawn to each other:

> We lay down facing one another, so close I could smell the round nutty scent of her breath, the sharp fragrance of her sweat…And then suddenly, in that centre place like a half-closed bud over which I had bent time-and-time again and with my fingers opened and pulled apart, something broke open and burst into life. We each took the other's leg in between, scissor-wise, and opened like sunned fruit one another's glowing groins, inhaling the inside-scent of urine, unwashed skin, sweat. With blind intent I searched the lineaments of her and discovered the tip of her hot between and stroked it, smooth and soft as her tongue, and the roof of my mouth ached as if I had tasted something too sweet. (2018, p.53-54).

Chris's account highlights the life-giving aspects of the moment of the girls' sexual encounter. Far removed from social constructs or notions of 'right' and 'wrong', Chris poetically compares the girls' "glowing groins" to flower buds and fruit, configuring same-sex sexuality as something indelibly ancient, instinctive, and closely connected to the natural world. The description highlights the sensory and the sensual, with Chris attuned to every smell and taste in the moment. The mentions of "sunned fruit" and the "sweet" taste in the roof of her mouth connect this sexual encounter to the earlier plunder of plums in the orchard: a metaphor

of forbidden fruit which haunts her in her adult life, and which symbolises that which is diametrically opposed to the strictures and demands of adult norms. Laue's use of the metaphor of forbidden fruit here also intertextually connects her story to Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* – in which the udala tree and its fruit serve as multi-layered images of mythology, female fertility, and transgression – and Arac de Nyeko's "Jambula Tree", in which the jambula tree's "unreachable fruit" (2013, p.103) – at times described as indistinguishable from breasts – similarly serve as representative of female same-sex desire and realms of the forbidden in hetero-patriarchal societies.

Chris and Gloria's "embryonic" state of being is disrupted by Chris's mother, who discovers the girls' hideout and pulls away the sheet of their makeshift tent in the moment of their intimacy. In a description that brings to mind the violent rupture of birth, the girls find themselves cringing "naked under the glare of light and the cool rush of air" (2018, p.54). This rupture signifies their exposure to the world of adult social norms, so that their moment of intimacy – which through Chris's child's eyes was seen as wordless and instinctive – is suddenly re-framed through the language and divisions of heteronormativity and racism. Chris's and Grace's mothers both use the colloquial South African exclamation "Sies!" to express their disgust at the girls' actions and both resort to physical violence in their reprimanding (2018, pp.56-58). Chris recounts how Gloria's mother grabbed Gloria by the wrists and pulled her home, "dragging Gloria behind her" even after her "knees collided with the ground" (2018, p.57). Chris's mother, meanwhile, "[drags her] up against the couch" and "[slaps her] across the face three times" (2018, p.58). This physical violence, however, seems to pale in comparison to the linguistic violence that follows, as Chris's mother scathingly reprimands her:

> You think you can just go around rubbing fannies with a little kaffir girl, hey? … She paused, as if waiting for me to reply, and then, without warning, her voice flew up. Sies! What are you? A homosexual! That's what you are. Did you know that? She laughed hysterically. (2018, p.58)

As starkly contrasted with the girls' childhood friendship and perspective, defined by an easy relationality and a wordless and sensory means of interacting with one another and the world around them, the sharp divisions and prejudices of the adult world are revealed in this admonishment. The crass and pejorative descriptor of women's same-sex sexuality ("rubbing fannies") juxtaposes with the poetic metaphors of fruit and flowers in Chris's recollections, and the violence of this descriptor is further compounded by the way in which Chris's mother enjoins it with the racial slur "kaffir", indicating the intricate overlaps between racism and heteronormativity in apartheid-era South Africa. The admonishment also brusquely defines the girls' previously wordless actions within the frameworks of adult language and knowledge, so that Chris's mother asks if she "know[s]" that she is a "homosexual": a label which, in her telling, is intertwined with shame and derision. What is important to highlight here is how "Plums" inverts the trope of a child's first experience of same-sex sexuality at the hands of an abusive adult: instead of same-sex sexuality being interlinked with violence, the violence against children in this story is instead interlinked with the hetero-patriarchal social norms which the children are being inducted into: the very norms which purport to 'protect' children from harm.

The violence of hetero-patriarchal norms that Chris experiences in her childhood lingers in the narration of her adulthood present. The birth of her child is not portrayed as a moment of celebration, but paradoxically as a moment that is associated with violence and death. She recalls "the midwife holding out the bloodied child like one of the animal trophies my father used to raise up", and she reflects that Brendan, her partner, "does not understand that in the child's beginning I saw my own end" (2018, p.55). Violence – or the nascent possibility of violence – seems to be omnipresent in her adult life, infusing even ordinary moments, seen not only in her description of childbirth, but also in her description of the seemingly mundane: "the serrated horizon" (2018, p.57) and "the skyscrapers" which "glint like knives in the late afternoon light" (2018, p.55). Chris is also overwhelmed by an awareness of the racial and gendered privileges that her baby boy has been born into. Capable of articulating and reflecting on these privileges in a way that her younger self could not, she observes the "red and fleshy" tinge of his lips and the "fearful shade of pink" of his skin, noting that "these colours will serve him well in life, as will, one day,

the tiny shaft nestled inside his nappy" (2018, p.60). She is also fearful of the linguistic violence that he will one day be capable of: "He can't yet speak, but when he does, what will he say? What words will he pick up and fling like stones, and pick up again to fling again?" (2018, p.60).

In her adulthood present, Chris feels disconnected from her own body, repulsed by her "surplus flesh" and her breasts that "loll huge and strange" (2018, p.55). She longs for the "slender strong limbs of [her] childhood, the tight knitted belly, the unencumbered flat chest" (2018, p.55). This bodily disconnection from adulthood is mirrored in her emotional state, her relations with others, and her seemingly irrational decisions and actions. One day, she takes her baby and drives to the supermarket in search of plums. What follows is a surreal narration of watching another shopper, a woman who mirrors her own actions and who reminds her of Gloria, who carefully picks items from the aisles before replacing all of them and only buying plums. Chris drifts in and out of consciousness and when she returns to consciousness she is back at home with Brendan, who reprimands her (as he would a child) for being "irresponsible", informing her that she dropped the baby and came home from the shop with nothing but plums (2018, p.55). That night, while Brendan is sleeping, she goes into the kitchen to find the plums and feeds small pieces of the fruit to her baby until they both fall asleep. Brendan, once again distressed in the morning when he finds her, tells her that she has left him with "no choice": an intimation that he may end the relationship or take the baby away from her (2018, p.62). Either way, the story ends with no suggestion of a resolution or of Chris learning to adjust to the demands of motherhood and adulthood.

In Chris's seeming inability or unwillingness to leave behind a childlike way of interacting with the world, we can read aspects of Stockton's (2009, p.11) concept of "growing sideways", which she proposes as an alternative to the culturally accepted notion of "growing up", in which childhood and adulthood are diametrically opposed, and in which children are expected to "mature" according to a "vertical, forward-motion". Growing "sideways", by contrast, refers to an alternative understanding of "growth" or maturation: a "horizontal" movement that "bring[s] 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sorts" (2018, p.11). The notion of 'growing sideways' in "Plums" can be discerned in Chris's inability to 'grow up' in the way that she is expected to, and this becomes integral to the story's critique of hetero-patriarchal societal norms. Through Chris's unusual perspective, the reader sees these norms in a new light – so that they appear as unwanted, enforced, and violent. This compels us to question what is deemed to be a 'given' in hetero-patriarchal societies: the expectation that all girls will 'grow up' into women who are happy to be wives and mothers. The unusual and underrepresented perspective presented in "Plums" shows us something different: that some people are unable to fit into these 'norms' and that these norms may be experienced as violent and unwanted for many.

> "Luhumyo's and Laue's stories present an important and novel addition to the growing body of queer-themed African literature."

Instead of conforming to the expected hetero-patriarchal norms of adulthood, Chris's postpartum depression seems to return her to a childhood perspective that represents defiance and alternative possibilities. The narration of her adulthood present notably also highlights the immediate, the sensory, and a closeness with the natural world that is very similar to her childhood perspective. She watches "the seasons change from [her] bedroom window" (2018, p.49) and is attuned to the "fragrant light", the "wind swell[ing] through the trees", and "the clear tissue of sound that hangs about the night" (2018, p.58). She also frequently seems to be unable to distinguish between the real and the imagined, or the past and the present, as seen in her surreal

account of the woman in the shop who mirrors her by only buying plums, or in her account of Gloria appearing before her in the kitchen of her adulthood present and unknotting the package of plums that she has just bought. As several critics have pointed out, child narrators in African literature frequently highlight a "blur between reality and the imaginary" (Wilkinson 2016, p.130). This blurring of the real and the imagined may sometimes be interpreted as indicative of 'madness' but, as Mathias Orhero (2022, p.8) has argued, this "madness" can also be seen as "a form of resistance…a protest against normalcy". It is this "protest against normalcy" that "Plums" highlights, as Chris's perspective effectively offers us the possibility of a different way of seeing and being in the world. Throughout the story, plums as a symbol of forbidden fruit – closely interlinked with same-sex sexuality – seem to represent defiance and a relationality which stand in stark contrast to the divisions and strictures of adult norms. Although she does not articulate the reasoning behind her actions, there is certainly the suggestion of rebellion in Chris's decisions to only buy plums from the supermarket and to feed these to her son: a suggestion, perhaps, of the hope that her son will one day be able to defy the hetero-patriarchal and racial norms and privileges into which he has been born.

Conclusion

Luhumyo's and Laue's stories present an important and novel addition to the growing body of queer-themed African literature. The stories demonstrate how a 'childlike' way of relating to others and to the world – guided by instinct, relationality, and defiance – can act as an important counterpoint to the divisiveness and repression of socially constructed norms that include heteronormative ideals. In their rejection of the literary trope of childhood same-sex experiences as entangled with paedophilia, the stories importantly portray how same-sex sexuality is an instinctive and natural component of many people's sexual development, removed from violence or coercion. This entails a reconsideration of the concept of childhood 'innocence' which, by extension, challenges constructions of 'innocent' children who require urgent protection from 'perverse' homosexuals. Rethinking and inverting constructions of 'innocence' and the innocence/perversity binary also carries wider implications for discourses and debates surrounding same-sex sexualities on the continent. In justifying recent anti-homosexuality legislation, African lawmakers and politicians frequently cite the importance of protecting African cultures, traditions, and 'values' against the dangers of a 'corrupting' Western influence. In a fairly typical statement, for instance, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni defended the passing of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act by stating that "Uganda will not embrace homosexuality and the West should stop seeking to impose its views" (Reid 2023). In statements such as these, Western or global LGBTQI+ human rights are framed as dangerous and unwanted 'impositions' on an idealised set of African values and cultures that need to be protected and defended. This discourse bears striking similarities to the notion of 'innocent' children who need to be protected from 'perverse' homosexuals. In this way, concepts of 'innocence' translate into broader queerphobic nationalist discourses, resulting in what Munro terms "fantasies of purity, whether cultural, national, or sexual" (2016, p.123). In texts that re-think and challenge the dangerous simplicity of the innocence/perversity axis, Munro (2016, p.134) suggests that we can read an important "rejection of the politics of wholeness, authenticity, and purity". Re-thinking concepts of childhood 'innocence', therefore, and by association the falsity of the innocence/perversity binary, brings a set of important broader implications. If same-sex desire is understood as innate, a possibility that resides within many people from childhood, and one that can exist as quite separate from any 'imposition' or coercion at the hands of a 'foreign' culture or a 'perverse' adult, then the falsity of the "fantasies of purity" that Munro refers to are revealed. Queerphobic legislation such as Uganda's 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act relies on constructions of the dangers of 'perverse' homosexuals and the 'imposing' West. Fictional representations of childhood experiences of same-sex sexuality in African contexts, as told through the eyes of young narrators/focalisers, present vital and underrepresented points of view which directly counter these constructions and discourses.

Notes

1. It is important to note that Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act and the framing of 'homosexuals' as inherently threatening to children echoes far-right and anti-LGBTQI+ discourses and legislation in many other parts of the world. Phillip Ayoub and Kristina Stoeckl (2024), for instance, write of Hungary's 2021 anti-LGBTQI+ legislation as "an example of state-sponsored homophobia" which "calculatedly conflated homosexuality and pedophilia". I am also aware that my discussion of Ugandan queerphobic public discourse alongside short stories from Kenya and South Africa (i.e. three very disparate contexts) may be interpreted as a careless homogenisation of 'African public discourses' or 'African literature'. This is not my intention. I am aware that I am discussing very different contexts, but am similarly aware that the recent rise of politicised queerphobia in Uganda is not dissimilar to the intensification of queerphobic discourses and the introduction of stringent anti-LGBTQI+ legislation in other contexts on the continent in recent years, including in countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi, Zambia, and Kenya (Amnesty International 2024). My discussion of Uganda's 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act is meant to serve as a very recent and specific example of the calculated and politicised conflation between homosexuality and paedophilia, but it is important to remember that this discourse reverberates elsewhere on the continent. Similarly, I argue that my comparative analysis of two stories from different parts of the continent could have reverberations and implications for other African contexts. As I elaborate in the article and in my conclusion, 'seeing anew' through a child focaliser's eyes could compel readers to reconsider the social constructedness and violence of hetero-patriarchal norms, as well as the constructions of 'innocence' and 'purity' which undergird politicised and nationalist queerphobic discourses in numerous contemporary African countries.

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Queer Spaces, Africanness, and *Bildung: The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba (The Wound)* in Conversation

By Ntokozo Wandile Mbokazi and Lucy Valerie Graham

Abstract

The Quiet Violence of Dreams (2001) and *Inxeba (The Wound)* (2017) are post-apartheid texts that reveal the violence inflicted on queer Black bodies within a patriarchal and homophobic society, while also challenging heteronormative conceptions of Africanness and exploring potential spaces where Black queerness might exist. Each work also functions as a narrative of personal growth: *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* is a Bildungsroman, while *Inxeba* focuses on the coming-of-age process into manhood through an initiation ritual. As stories of development and initiation, both texts explore whether queer Black bodies can find a place within post-apartheid South African communities—or whether they remain excluded. Although both works have been widely discussed in academic circles, no prior study has examined them together. We contend that these two post-apartheid works can be compared in terms of heteronormative disciplinary violence, as well as in relation to themes of queerness and Africanness. This comparison raises additional questions about potential spaces for Black queerness in the aftermath of apartheid.

Introduction

The Quiet Violence of Dreams (2001) and *Inxeba (The Wound)* (2017) are two post-apartheid works that centre queer Black identities and intimacies, and foreground heteropatriarchal disciplinary violence. Following Livermon in "*Inxeba*: Rethinking Dichotomies of Black Queer Visibilities" we employ the term queer "as an overarching term to think through a constellation of non-normative genders and sexualities" (Livermon 2023, p.213). Notably, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba* are set in a country with extraordinarily high levels of male-on-male violence and anti-queer violence, despite this same country being governed by a constitution that is supposed to prohibit discrimination based on sexuality or sexual orientation. Gender-

“*The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001) was written by K. Sello Duiker and provokes significant commentary on queerness and race in the post-apartheid era.”

based violence and anti-queer violence are the consequences of histories of violence, and of patriarchal, heteronormative conceptions of masculinity. While *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba* expose the violence meted out to queer Black bodies within a patriarchal and homophobic society, they also challenge heteronormative ideas of Africanness, and explore questions about spaces where Black queerness can exist. Both texts are also narratives of *Bildung* as *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* is a *Bildungsroman* while *Inxeba* is a film specifically about “coming of age” into manhood through an initiation ritual. As narratives of development and initiation, these two texts meditate on the possibilities of queer Black bodies being integrated into communities in post-apartheid South Africa, or not. While each text has received substantial scholarly attention, no previous study has placed *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba* into conversation. We argue that these two post-apartheid texts can be placed into productive comparative conversation around the theme of heteronormative disciplinary violence, but also around questions of queerness and Africanness, opening up further questions about possible spaces for Black queerness to exist after apartheid.

The Quiet Violence of Dreams (2001) was written by K. Sello Duiker and provokes significant commentary on queerness and race in the post-apartheid era. The novel is predominantly set in the city of Cape Town, though by the end Tshepo, the protagonist, has moved to Johannesburg. The novel is one of the earliest post-apartheid literary works to centre Black male queerness, yet, according to Andy Carolin and Ronit Frenkel, much of the critical reception of the novel has “been problematic in its tendency to negate or ignore the significance of the same-sex intimacies in the text,” as “[m]ost scholarship on the novel has tended to sideline the literary and cultural significance of the text’s multiple sexual encounters” (Carolin and Frenkel 2013, p.38). Carolin and Frenkel are also critical of receptions of the novel that insist on reading gender in the novel through the binary taxonomies of heterosexual vs. homosexual. Instead, they claim that *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* explodes static renderings of sexual identity. Queer men in the novel draw on masculine and feminine performativity and aesthetics, some are serious and others are thrill-seeking. Tshepo and his white friend, West, have sex with each other, and both also have sex with other men and women.

The film *Inxeba* (2017) was directed by John Trengove and written by Malusi Bengu, Thando Mgqolozana, and Trengrove. Like *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, *Inxeba* also centres queer Black bodies and heteropatriarchal disciplinary violence. *Inxeba* attracted controversy due to its representation of queer masculinities in the traditional Xhosa rite of *ulwaluko*, and a legal battle even ensued in South Africa over the age restriction to be applied to the film. According to Wemar Strydom, the Film and Publication Board decided to “apply an X18 rating to Inxeba – effectively banning the film from being shown in commercial venues after it had already enjoyed a limited, though critically well-received, run in art cinema theatres across the country” (Strydom 2018, p.1). Protesters also sought to prevent the film from being screened in the Eastern Cape. Manona and Hurst point out that reactions to the film were significantly charged, such that some “leading actors received death threats” (Manona and Hurst 2018, p.2), and that “many who expressed unhappiness with the film were male members of various Xhosa communities countrywide” (Manona and Hurst 2018, p.2). Some critics of the film claimed that its interrogation of *ulwaluko* opens the cultural rite itself to the public whereas it is supposed to remain a private tradition, and

there were accusations that Trengrove, the white director, was performing "cultural appropriation" (Manona and Hurst 2018, p.8). We do not have the space here to delve into the implications of the claim that *Inxeba* made secret and sacred rites visible to outsiders, including women and white people, which could be presented as a valid critique of the film. However, it is clear that homophobia played a significant role in the outcry against the film. The Gauteng chairman of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa, Prince Manene Tabane, suggested that Xhosa men "are being embarrassed," and went on to express explicitly homophobic views, commenting that "the things that are being shown there is not what is happening in the mountain. It is disgusting and disrespectful of our cultural practices" (Tabane qtd. in Mabasa 2018).

Inxeba focuses on three characters, Kwanda (played by Niza Jay Ncoyini), Xolani (played by Nakhane), and Vija (played by Bongile Mantsai) who are engaged in the multi-stage Xhosa initiation process known as *ulwaluko*, where youths are circumcised and are initiated into manhood. *Inxeba* is set mainly in the rural Eastern Cape of South Africa, however, in the early parts of the film and the final scenes of the film there is a montage between rural and urban environments. The three primary characters, Xolani, Vija, and Kwanda all meet at a mountain in the Eastern Cape. Xolani and Vija are *amakhankatha* (caretakers) in charge of *amakhwetha* (initiates) such as Kwanda. The caretakers are charged with ushering the young boys into manhood. Notably, Xolani and Vija are engaged in a seemingly secret love affair that only takes place on the mountain where they meet regularly as caretakers and where the initiation ritual occurs. Kwanda is a youth who is sent to the mountain by his father Khwalo. Kwanda is coded as being queer in the film, and his father believes that he is "too soft" (Trengrove 2017). Kwanda is however eventually killed by Xolani in an act of heteropatriarchal disciplinary violence, when Kwanda threatens to reveal Xolani and Vija's love affair, thereby threatening to disrupt the heteropatriarchal discourse of the *ulwaluko* ritual.

The reception of *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* has tended towards some moral outrage at the "sodomy" depicted in the novel (Ezeliora 200, p.172), or has focused on Tshepo's queer experiences at "Steamy Windows" as a strategy of survival (Gagiano, 2004;

> "In this article, we bring *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba* into conversation to show how both texts rescript ideas of queerness in an African context, and how they can be read as narratives of postcolonial *Bildung*, rather than as ideal or traditional narratives of *Bildung*."

Loukson 2020), or as a broader allegory of the post-apartheid era (Munro 2007), with some critics skirting around the question of same-sex desire (Tšehloane, 2010), or focusing on trauma and violence in the novel without much consideration of same-sex desire and intimacy (Shinners 2019; Sapsford 2020). We build on Carolin and Frenkel's observations that the novel "challenges the cultural invisibility of black practitioners of same-sex intimacies in South Africa" (Carolin and Frenkel 2013, p.36), though we take the ending of the novel into account when considering the kinds of spaces that are available to Tshepo in this narrative of *Bildung*. As outlined above, *Inxeba* was regarded as an extremely controversial film when it was released. Some scholarship has focused on this reception (Mbao 2020; Ncube 2020; Manona and Hurst, 2018), or on critiquing the film for "merely mimicking western/colonial gender embodiment discourse" (Moraka 2018), and for "[failing] in its (mis) representation of *ulwaluko* as less than a complex, nuanced and rich cultural practice" (Kiguwa and Siswana 2018). We build on the comments of Scott as he argues that the film "challenges dominant constructions of Xhosa masculinities by going to

the foundation of dominant Xhosa masculinities, namely the male initiation process" (Scott 2020, p.26), though we relate the narrative to conventions of *Bildung* as a coming-of-age narrative. In this article, we bring *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba* into conversation to show how both texts rescript ideas of queerness in an African context, and how they can be read as narratives of postcolonial *Bildung*, rather than as ideal or traditional narratives of *Bildung*.

As we argue, both *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba* dislodge patriarchal and heteronormative paradigms of masculinity that claim to be rooted in notions of authentic Africanness. Regarding *Bildung* and disciplinary violence, we ask to what extent the environments depicted in the texts are able to incorporate queer Black bodies. As Joseph Slaughter notes in *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law*, whereas the traditional *Bildungsroman* emphasises the protagonist's eventual incorporation into society, post-colonial narratives of *Bildung* are often characterised by "disillusionment" and a lack of incorporation, exposing that promises of freedom, development, and self-determination are betrayed in the protagonists' contexts (Slaughter 2007, p.38). While *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* is a polyvocal text, in Tshepo's first-person narration he comes to realise that his desires for self-determinism are limited due to heteropatriarchal disciplinary violence which spills out of the carceral system, and due to the legacy of a racialised past. By the end, when he has moved to Johannesburg, Tshepo ends up, not incorporated into post-apartheid society, but rather marginalised within it. In *Inxeba*, Kwanda is eventually killed after he proclaims that he is now a man and that no one should tell him who to love. Thus the ideal narrative of *Bildung*, which "traces the 'progressive harmonization' of the individual and society" (Graham 2012, p.169) fails to materialise in each text. But it is also through this lack of integration of both Kwanda and Tshepo that the works problematise traditional and binary configurations of gender and sexuality, encouraging a more complex and less static rendering of sexual identities. Consequently, both *Inxeba* and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* may be decoded as gesturing to alternative masculinities that are conceivable outside of patriarchal masculine norms of violence and domination legitimised by political and cultural institutions, violence that results in the rape of Tshepo, and the murder of Kwanda.

Rescripting Queerness in an African Context and Exploring Queer Spaces

The Quiet Violence of Dreams and *Inxeba* unfold in markedly different settings and contexts, and appeared 16 years apart, but both explore alternative masculinities that reject static categorisation, and challenge the idea of queerness as unAfrican. Indeed, the two texts may be placed into conversation around conceptualisations of fluid masculinities and around debates about queerness and Africanness. When Tshepo is working at the male brothel "Steamy Windows" in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, a white male character named West kisses Tshepo upon their first meeting. However, West suggests it is not sexual and it is merely a salutation that is "more meaningful, more personal than shaking hands" (Duiker 2001, p.244). West will also suggest that he prefers women, although he has sex with men at "Steamy Windows." Tshepo enjoys sex with men and reflects on sex he has enjoyed with women as well. Sexual identity is thus rendered fluid in the text. Further, Tshepo disputes various discursive views of race and culture in relation to queerness. *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* disrupts cultural and socio-political discourses, such as ideas of authentic Africanness which privilege heteronormative masculinities. When Tshepo begins working at "Steamy Windows," he forms a relationship with another white male character named Sebastian and they often discuss their sexual histories and sexual orientation. In one of their early conversations, Tshepo disputes the legitimacy of authentic African masculinity as being rooted in a heteronormative patriarchal gender ideology. He tells Sebastian that, "people always say that black culture is rigid and doesn't want to accept things like homosexuals and lesbians. You know the argument - it's very unAfrican. It's a lot of crap" (Duiker 2001, p.250). Tshepo goes on to suggest that these ideas are in fact a consequence of Western influence, he offers that, "that kind of thinking comes from urbanised blacks, people who've watered down the real origin of our culture and mixed it with Anglo-Saxon notions of the Bible" (2001, p.250). Tshepo's analysis here has resonance for reading *Inxeba*, in that this

view from Tshepo is a counter-narrative to the discourse expressed outwardly by the community of men on the mountain in *Inxeba*.

Central to rewritings of the discourses that queerness is unAfrican is the idea that tradition is socially constructed. The idea of tradition as "invented" is not new; in fact, the idea of "invented tradition" was coined in 1983 in the book *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. There are also numerous studies detailing the ways in which queer identities were included in African societies prior to colonialism. In *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* Sylvia Tamale claims that "woman-to-woman marriages have been documented in more than thirty African societies" (Tamale 2020, p.101). Further, Marc Epprecht in *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* additionally contributes to a queer African history by stating "African men sometimes have sex with other men or boys, today as in the past" (Epprecht 2008, p.6). What is remarkable in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, however, is that in this novel, published less than a decade after the formal end of apartheid, a queer Black character points to the idea of so-called "tradition" as invented, in the context of situating queerness within African culture, as Tshepo states that the idea of African "traditional" culture as heteronormative has been "invented" through hybridisations between African indigenous beliefs and Christianity. This is all the more remarkable since, as Grant Andrews has noted, prior to the end of apartheid, queerness was not visibly a subject of South African literature: "Before the end of apartheid, queer lives were almost entirely unrepresented in public literary works in South Africa. Only after the fall of institutionalised apartheid could literature begin to look back at the role of queer people in the history of South Africa, and begin to acknowledge that queer people are a part of the fabric of South African society" (Andrews 2019, p.1).

Inxeba also presents discursive disturbance as it challenges notions that authentic African masculinity is heterosexual. The context of the film, that of a traditional Xhosa initiation rite into manhood, is rooted in patriarchal heteronormativity which utilises the constructed idea of an authentic African culture as a legitimising factor of this worldview. Kwanda's father, other elders, and even other initiates uphold views of non-heteronormative sexualities as unAfrican. Further, the rural landscape where the *ulwaluko* ritual occurs is often seen as "authentically African" due in part to the absence of apparent European influence. Kwanda, who is coded as queer in *Inxeba,* poses a disruption to ideas of "traditional" African masculinity, and this disruption is framed as a consequence of Kwanda's proximity to whiteness and the city. Vija tells Kwanda: "You're here to fuck up our ways... I see your tricks, you act like you don't care but you won't be satisfied until you've disrupted our ways" (Trengrove 2017). Of course, the statement is highly ironic given Vija's own sexuality, but the "disruption" referenced here is Kwanda's visible queerness. The reference to "our ways" suggests that Kwanda's performative queerness has been brought about by proximity to whiteness and the city, and that this is a threat to "traditional" rural ways. The elders in the film also support the notion of queerness as a Western intrusion and unAfrican. Towards the end of the film, before Xolani kills Kwanda, as they walk towards the highway, one of the elders of the mountain offers parting words of

> "Heteropatriarchy is an institution that is passed on from generation to generation, and both Kwanda's and Tshepo's fathers seek to transform their sons into men who conform to hegemonic masculinity."

wisdom that reinforce heteropatriarchy and frame queerness and Western influence as dangerous and destructive to life: "Open your ears. Open your eyes. Reject the foreign ways of the city" (Trengrove 2017). In a similar vein, in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, Tshepo's father rejects him and levels slurs against him, asking: "What is this business that I hear that you go to faggot nightclubs? I didn't bring you up to be a stabane. Are you a faggot?" (Duiker 2001, p.190). Similarly, Kwanda's father insists that Kwanda needs to be reformed and have his "softness" removed. Heteropatriarchy is an institution that is passed on from generation to generation, and both Kwanda's and Tshepo's fathers seek to transform their sons into men who conform to hegemonic masculinity.

However, *Inxeba* also showcases Kwanda's ability to complete the traditional ritual of *ulwaluko*, which is supposed to lead him into manhood, despite his evident queerness. The film depicts a queer body completing this traditional rite of passage into manhood and shows other queer bodies, namely Xolani and Vija, as having completed this rite as well. In this way, the film showcases queer identity as not excluded by and contradictory to African customs but existing within Africanness. Contrary to what Tshepo suggests in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, the men from *Inxeba* who represent "tradition" are not "urbanised blacks" (Duiker 2001, p.250) but rather the men who are elders and caretakers on the mountain. Yet the character Vija in *Inxeba*, who engages in same-sex intimacy, is also not typically "urbanised" or Westernised. For instance, when Xolani requests passage from a white farmer to see a waterfall, Vija does not even speak to the white farmer, implying that his contact with white people is limited, perhaps by choice. In this way, the film echoes Tshepo's idea that "It's stupid to suggest that homosexuality and lesbianism are foreign to black culture. Long ago, long before whites, people were aware of the blurs. They must have been" (Duiker 2001, p.250). At the end of *Inxeba*, when Kwanda tells Xolani, "I'm a man now. I'm not taking anyone's shit. Not my dad's, not anybody's" (Trengrove 2017), he is using his experience on the mountain to critique heteropatriarchy. As Kwanda and Xolani walk on the mountain after the completion of the ritual, Kwanda states, "This is South Africa...we're not led by Mugabe...Like Africa doesn't know gay love. I'm sure Shaka and his warriors all wanted each other... how can love destroy a nation?" (Trengrove 2017). This echoes Tshepo's statements about queer desire existing in precolonial African societies.

For Kwanda, queerness and African manhood are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the African ritual his father made him participate in becomes integral to his self-determining capacity to love who he chooses. Livermon suggests:

> In reworking and revising tradition, black queers offer a critique of the ways that tradition has been selectively appropriated to reinforce heteropatriarchy... black queer engagement with forms of tradition reveals tradition to be a set of practices that are fluid and constantly in process. (Livermon 2015, p.17)

In this way Kwanda's coming-of-age mirrors Tshepo's from *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*.

Both texts also reflect on aspects of class in discursive constructions of sexuality. In "Homosexuality & the Postcolonial Idea: Notes from Kabelo Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*," Ives S. Loukson suggests that "Steamy Windows" is merely "a strategy for survival" as Tshepo is "representative of poor black South Africans in the narrative" who see "homosexuality as a wonderful opportunity to make money" and it is this "that compels him to homosexuality" (Loukson 2020, p.110). This idea that a character can be "compelled to homosexuality" misses the text's dislocation between sex acts and sexual identity, and frames queerness as a deviation from a Black character's identity. Duiker positions sexual intimacy as a means to achieve community as well as part of Tshepo's coming-of-age and not as an identity marker. West says that working at "Steamy Windows" may have saved him from "self-destruction" (Duiker 2001, p.297). Tshepo arrives at "Steamy Windows" soon after he is raped and robbed by his housemate, Chris, leaving him homeless. In effect, "Steamy Windows" provides Tshepo (under the pseudonym of Angelo) with a restorative male community, allowing him to make a living, gain confidence, and consider himself as self-determining, though he eventually learns the racialised limitations of this community.

West, Tshepo, and Sebastian in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, and Xolani and Vija in *Inxeba* find meaning in same-sex encounters, even though they may not exclusively have sex with other men.

Inxeba has a heteropatriarchal setting where heterosexual masculinity that is stoic and strong is achieved through *ulwaluko*, and this identity is sanctioned and legitimised by framing it as authentically African. According to Manona and Hurst, *ulwaluko* is a highly significant cultural rite for the Xhosa people: "For the Xhosa nation, *ulwaluko* – long seen as a tradition that has stood the test of time – is regarded as a sacred and necessary step toward proper or real 'manhood'; and ulwaluko is so widely acknowledged by the Xhosa nation that many view it as the only culturally recognised path" (Manona and Hurst 2018, p.2) to manhood. While *ulwaluko* includes the act of circumcision, it includes other rites and masculine education as well. A traditional surgeon referred to as *ingcibi* performs the circumcision. *Inxeba* uses a close-up and unsteady shot to emphasise the toughness and roughness of the *ingcibi* as the surgeon orders each young man to "spread" (Trengrove, 2017) their legs. There are no supportive words exchanged. The initiates are expected to endure this moment without showing pain. After the circumcision in the film, they are instructed to shout "*ndiyindoda*" ("I am a man") (Trengrove 2017). The expectation for *amakhwetha* to endure the pain of the circumcision is highlighted in the scene that follows the circumcision. Xolani and Kwanda are in their hut, it is the first time the pair are seen together and Xolani is dressing Kwanda's wound. As Kwanda continually grimaces and moans at the uncovering of the wound, Xolani says to him "I'll leave it like this. Do you want to do it yourself?" (Trengrove 2017). Xolani is stern, initially not showing Kwanda any compassion. After Xolani emerges from his shared hut with Kwanda, seemingly the day after the circumcision, he encounters other caregivers. Xolani walks through the group of men having a conversation while the camera follows him in a front-facing tracking shot. One of the caregivers can be heard saying "I've got five dicks to look at...I'll need a warm vagina soon" (Trengrove 2017). This statement uses the rhetoric of heteropatriarchal masculinity, the suggestion that men need sex from women. Further, the reference to "a warm vagina" and not an entire woman speaks to the heteropatriarchal discourse of female objectification. Following this scene, Xolani and Vija, who are secret same-sex lovers, exchange teasing heteronormative banter. Vija shouts to Xolani, "how's your sister?", insinuating sexual interest in Xolani's sister, to which Xolani replies "Still married, Vija, just like you" (Trengrove 2017). Thus, in the early part of the film, a particular heterosexual and stoic hegemonic masculinity is created by the gatekeepers and guides on the mountain who are meant to lead the young men into heteronormative "traditional" masculinity. However, this is quickly disrupted when Xolani and Vija, gatekeepers and guides to the institution of heteropatriarchal masculinity on the mountain, are shown having sex.

Xolani and Vija's secret sexual intimacy, juxtaposed with the heteropatriarchal culture of the mountain, simultaneously reinforces the heterosexual pressures of the mountain as a space for the making of men, while disrupting the notion that queerness is unAfrican. Xolani and Vija are sexually intimate three times in the film. Twice this intimacy is performed in private spaces, seemingly away from the heterosexual gaze, at first, in an abandoned building, the only built structure in the rural forest landscape. In the second incident, Vija and Xolani are cast as shadows on the screen, metaphorically speaking to their hiding and lovemaking in the figurative shadows. These two intimate moments represent what Livermon refers to as "(non) visibility" (Livermon 2023). They occur in secret; however, they still occur. After Xolani and Vija have been intimate twice, the two have a conversation about Kwanda. Xolani and Vija are walking in an open veld reminiscing about Vija's sister when Vija asks Xolani about whether Kwanda is "a faggot" (Trengrove, 2017). Vija is clearly a split subject who feels it necessary to identify Kwanda as being queer, which distances Vija from his own queerness. The possible damage to himself of his own denial is emphasised as on the mountain as Vija is often inebriated, either drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana. Vija is often extremely rough and dominating in his sexual encounters with Xolani, but towards the end of the film. However, after he defends Xolani against young initiates who challenge his authority on the suspicion of Xolani being queer, Vija leads Xolani to the water and initiates sexual tenderness. The presumably healing symbolism of the waterfall is brought onto the screen as both Vija and Xolani bathe each other. This striking visual is a further disruption of discourse that queerness is unAfrican and occuring

in an urban environment, as the waterfall serves as a visual backdrop here for same-sex intimacies.

In "Usable Traditions: creating sexual autonomy in post-apartheid South Africa," Livermon claims:

> If tradition is represented as that which is authentically and unproblematically African, then same-sex sexuality is its direct opposite — its constitutive outside. Under this formulation, black queers cannot exist as part of African cultural practices represented by tradition. They can only be some manifestation of cultural loss and ultimately alienation from African subjectivity. (Livermon 2012, p.6)

Vija makes this point to Xolani when Xolani suggests that they escalate their romantic relationship. Vija repeatedly tells Xolani "we can't" (Trengrove 2017). These refusals of a publicly queer relationship allude to the heteropatriarchal discursive pressures on the mountain and perhaps beyond it. As Vija suggests "we can't," and not, "I won't," Vija reinforces the suggestion that public same-sex desire is not viable, despite his own personal desires. This theme of Vija representing traditional African masculinity, while performing acts of queer intimacy, is a significant tension in the film. Vija represents a paragon of "traditional" African masculinity, supposedly uncontaminated by "whiteness" or life in the cities. He is marked as masculine and daring, as when he steals a goat from the white farmer who bars the *amakhwetha* from accessing the waterfall, and he upholds the rules of the mountain. Yet, in secret, Vija explores his own queer sexuality.

The African initiation process, while allowing Kwanda to reconcile his queerness and masculinity, does not "harmoniously incorporate" (Graham 2012, p.169) him into the dominant heteropatriarchal community. This becomes clear towards the end of the film, after Kwanda stumbles upon Vija and Xolani naked together in a moment of post-coital vulnerability. In this moment the queerness of Vija is clear to Kwanda, who scornfully says to Vija, "does your wife know the rubbish you get up to on the mountain?" (Trengrove 2017). Soon after, as Xolani ostensibly leads Kwanda to an alternative route home, Xolani says to Kwanda: "You cannot speak of what you saw here on the mountain" (Trengrove 2017). Kwanda is dismissive, and Xolani protects his secret self through violence. By killing

"The African initiation process, while allowing Kwanda to reconcile his queerness and masculinity, does not "harmoniously incorporate" (Graham 2012, p.169) him into the dominant heteropatriarchal community."

Kwanda at the film's denouement, Xolani protects his and Vija's invisible queer relationship in order to sustain the ideology that *ulwaluko* is an overtly heteronormative space. Critiquing a society that cannot incorporate Xolani, his murder of Kwanda also highlights that visibility in certain spaces can be dangerous for queer Black bodies.

Rather than conforming to idealist narratives of *Bildung* that foreground the "image of man in the process of becoming" (Graham 2012, p.169), both *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba* can be read as "postcolonial (sub)versions" of *Bildung* that "reflect critically on the process of incorporation" (2001, p.169). As Graham argues, "while the individual's harmonization with society resolves the coming-of-age process in the idealist *Bildungsroman*" (168), this does not occur in most postcolonial narratives of *Bildung*, potentially offering a critique of the contexts that fail to incorporate the protagonists. While Tshepo attains some level of freedom in queer clubs and through his work at "Steamy Windows," he must still navigate the racial and class tensions of the cityscape, and he has nonetheless experienced heteronormative disciplinary violence within the city. This violence

reaches a crescendo when Tshepo's flatmate Chris and his cronies gang rape Tshepo. According to Graham, Chris and his gang members are not perpetrating a "homosexual rape," but rather it is "rape perpetrated by heterosexual men as a means of showing gang solidarity and hierarchy, as a disciplinary act against a man who is regarded as weak or feminine" (2001, p.179). It is clear that Chris is using heteronormative disciplinary violence against Tshepo when, prior to the rape, after physically abusing Tshepo and orchestrating the loss of his job, he says: "He doesn't think he's better anymore, not since he lost his job. That smile on his face. It's gone. I took it away...I fixed him good. And he keeps the house clean, like I want" (Duiker 2001, p.210). Later, when Chris decides to rape Tshepo in order to "fix him," he says "You like this don't you, huh? You like it, don't you" (2001, p.212). In this way, Chris alludes to Tshepo's potential queerness and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* thereby depicts "corrective rape." Although the term "corrective rape" in South Africa usually refers to a type of rape used by agents of heteronormative patriarchy to discipline Black lesbians, we use it here to refer to disciplinary rape directed at a queer Black man. As in *Inxeba*, where Kwanda is killed to hide the secret same-sex intimacy that occurs on the mountain, the heteropatriarchal disciplinary violence experienced by Tshepo is rooted in a society marked by toxic hypermasculinities that imbue violence into actors in order to reinforce heteronormativity.

After the rape, Tshepo finds refuge and a space for personal growth during same-sex intimacies at "Steamy Windows," where he is able to express his queerness, under the pseudonym "Angelo". Indeed, the chapters narrated by Tshepo before his time at "Steamy Windows" are entitled "Tshepo," but as he transforms at "Steamy Windows," the chapters narrated by him begin to be entitled "Angelo." During this transformation he sheds his awkwardness and gains a sense of confidence. When he again meets his friend Mmabatho towards the end of his employment at "Steamy Windows" she notices his maturation and coming-of-age, observing to herself "his new adult tone" and that "people grow up quietly" (2001, p.449). However, if the apparent brotherhood and same-sex experiences at "Steamy Windows" facilitate Tshepo/Angelo's coming of age, they also ultimately leave him disillusioned. According to Sebastian, "Steamy Windows" is modelled on the Brotherhood of Pre-Raphaelite society (2001, p.256), and is supposed to transcend race and class. But this is not achieved. While the masculinities at "Steamy Windows" are bonded by their deviation from heteronormative masculinities and sexual practices, the text displays ways in which these masculinities are still racialised and racially divided. Tshepo initially notes potential racist and misogynist implications in Sebastian's speech about transcendent societies. When Tshepo challenges Sebastian's reference to "so-called primitive people" (2001, p.249) as an allusion to Black people viewed through the Western lens, Sebastian confirms that he means "whoever the West thinks is primitive" (2001, p.249). Tshepo brushes such moments aside initially. However, well into Tshepo's job at "Steamy Windows," the white manager named Shaun suggests to Tshepo that he was nervous a customer would "go kaffir," and although Tshepo is "shocked," he thinks to himself, "the bubble had to burst sometime" (2001, p.285). This moment is the beginning of the end for Tshepo, as the idealism that "Steamy Windows" initially presented is unravelling. Shaun attempts to offer a poor ahistorical context for the term, but it is obvious that by using this racial slur, Shaun invokes racial stereotypes of Black people as that violent, thieving, and unruly. Following this interaction with Shaun, Tshepo is discriminated against by a white gay man in a bar called New Yorkers, which makes him reflect that "I feel depressed and disillusioned, naive forever fooling myself that gay people are different. They are white people before they are gay" (2001, p.343). Tshepo eventually leaves "Steamy Windows" after becoming "disillusioned" by these experiences of racism, which interrupts the coming-of-age that he had achieved through queer intimacy.

Slaughter claims that in postcolonial narratives of *Bildung*, "the promises of developmentalism and self-determinism are revealed to be empty, or at least exaggerated; *Bildung* thus becomes the process of recognizing the limits of personal development" (Slaughter 2007, p.38). This is true for Tshepo-Angelo. After the incidents of racism that Tshepo-Angelo experiences, his identity is split in the text and his narrative sections are no longer titled "Angelo" but rather "Angelo-Tshepo". The first narratorial split of his identity in a chapter title occurs in the same chapter in which Tshepo mentions his deceased

mother. This is significant as it is the first time that Tshepo has spoken of her since Chris raped him, when he stated that he felt like his "mother died again" (Duiker 2001, p.214). There is a sense of loss in both chapters, the loss of his mother, but also the loss of part of himself. His disillusionment with gay culture in Cape Town culminates in a trip to a Cape Town township where he witnesses the injustices that remain a legacy of apartheid, and where the Black inhabitants reflect the lack of "developmentalism" and "self-determinism" he had thought Cape Town could offer.

"Steamy Windows" and the queer clubs of Cape Town in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* are represented as everything the elder in *Inxeba* warns the initiates to be concerned about. But while Tshepo has some freedom to explore his sexual identity in certain spaces in Cape Town, a freedom that Xolani and Vija do not have, this freedom has its restrictions. In the early parts of the novel, Tshepo suggests that he moved to Cape Town to "run away from the whole race thing" (2001, p.34) and he goes on to state that people in Cape Town care more about class than race, "they want to say ah you're cool and not ah you're black or white" (2001, p.35). Tshepo will eventually be dissuaded of this idea, however, as *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* navigates an unfulfilled post-apartheid ideal. The novel initially positions "Steamy Windows" as a potential post-racial utopia where black and white men sleep together, challenging the apartheid stance against homosexuality and interracial relationships. But even within this space, the novel reveals to the reader that the traumatic South African past of racialisation endures.

However, the text does offer a glimmer of hope in its denouement as Tshepo moves to Johannesburg. After many chapters entitled "Angelo-Tshepo," the final chapter is entitled "Tshepo" again. Indeed, Tshepo remarks, "In Jo'burg everyone knows me as Tshepo. I left Angelo behind in Cape Town, still roaming its streets and exploring its underworld" (2001, p.452). In Johannesburg, he now works in a children's home, looking after children from abusive environments. By participating in giving these children a safe space, Tshepo can be read as performing some kind of healing of his own past. He has retained his love for men, and same-sex intimacy is still pivotal to the narrative as he goes on to say, "Once a week I go for a night out in town…I always meet special men…intimacy of some sort is part of our ritual. They offer me blueprints for survival, for building a new civilisation, a new way of life" (2001, p.455). This glimpse of a new and alternative life is about queerness, but also, even from his male friends such as bankers who work in a capitalist economy, he begins to see that "capitalism is not the only way" (2001, p.455). His creativity becomes linked to his queerness as he buys an easel and speaks to it: "I tell it about the men I like, the ones I fantasise about" (2001: 455). In Johannesburg, however, he lives in a fugitive community of "illegal and legal immigrants" (454), and as such, he is not incorporated into mainstream society, but it is here that he feels that he "live[s] in Africa" (2001: 454) and that he has "space [and] time to think" (2001, p.455). Thus, "*The Quiet Violence of Dreams* may be read as a 'dissensual' version of the *Bildungsroman* in that it does not entirely abandon an ideal of harmonious integration" (Graham 2012, p.180). Whereas Tshepo's coming-of-age was shaped by his experiences in the "underworld" of "Steamy Windows" in Cape Town, the freedom offered by this space was limited. By the end of the novel Tshepo survives by living a marginalised life, in a marginalised community. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Kwanda, who is killed at the end of *Inxeba*.

Conclusion

It is concerning that, while set at least 15 years apart, both *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba* reflect upon ongoing violent realities for queer Black South Africans. "Corrective rape" and murder are some of the violent realities that queer Black people face in the post-apartheid era, in both urban spaces to the rural areas. At the same time, however, by referring to pre-colonial same-sex intimacies, both texts disrupt narratives that serve to exclude queer bodies in contemporary African contexts. The impressive feat of both *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba* is the recasting of queer identity as potentially African, and as providing spaces for community. For queer Black readers and viewers both texts would seem to usher in a sense of community, in the very process of reading or viewing. Ncube comments thus on the potential significance of *Inxeba*:

> … for viewers who identify as gay, watching the film offers a space of recognition and belonging.

> For these viewers, the process of viewing the film becomes an empowering experience in which kinship and community are forged and coalesced. The screen represents a space of contact and dialogue where ideas of what it means to be black and queer are performatively discussed and rethought. (2020, p.68)

Vija and Xolani's lovemaking at the waterfall in *Inxeba* is the only representation of gentle

intimacy during the happenings on the mountain. This softness is mirrored in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* in Tshepo's intimate encounters with West, Sebastian and with other men at the end of the novel. Despite the heteronormative disciplinary violence visited upon

Tshepo and Kwanda, and despite the fact that these two characters cannot be incorporated into a dominant homophobic and racist post-apartheid culture, both texts open up questions about spaces for queer Black bodies, asking what these spaces might look like. These questions then lead to further questions: whether queer invisibility would have to be a norm, and whether there are possibilities within South Africa, in Tshepo's words, "for building a new civilisation, a new way of life" (Duiker 2001).

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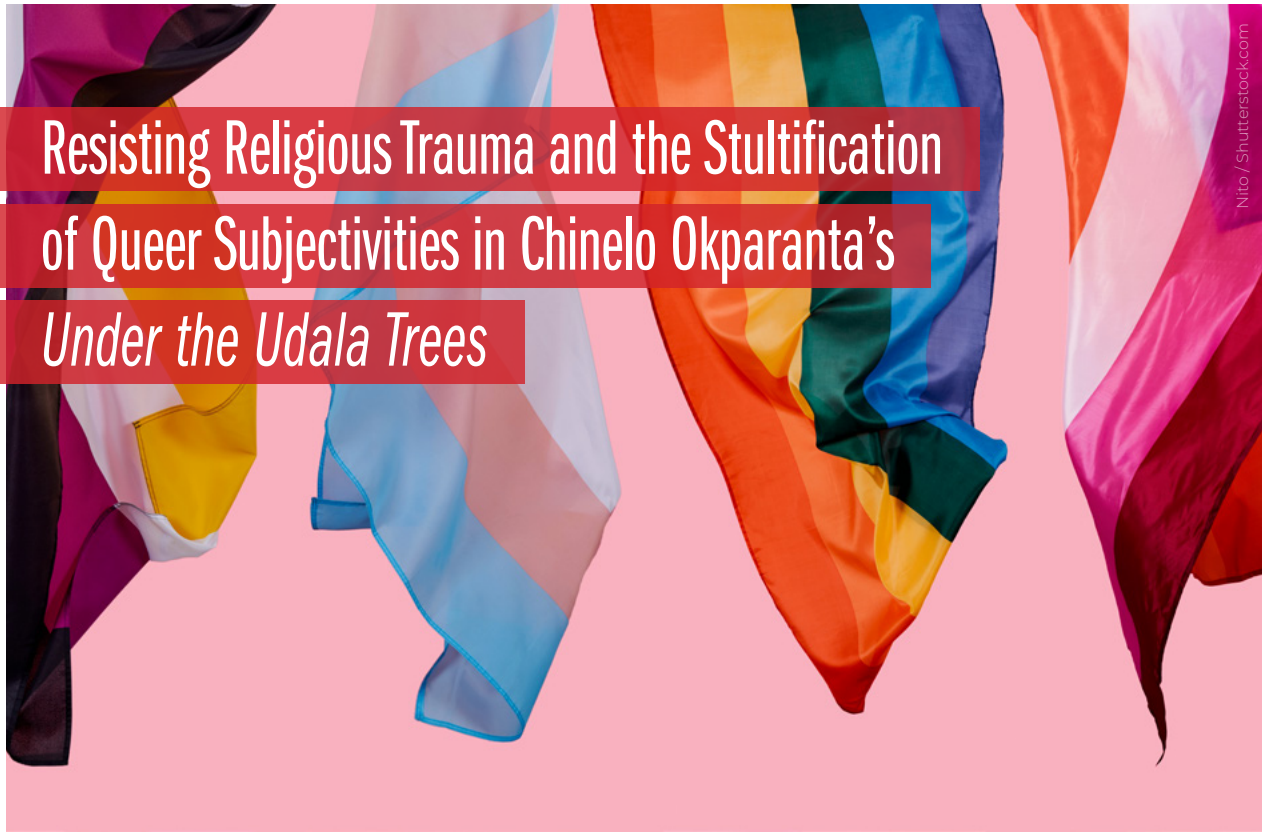

Resisting Religious Trauma and the Stultification of Queer Subjectivities in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

By Wisani Mushwana

Abstract

In Nigeria, politics is intricately linked to religion to such an extent that political leaders have relied on religious doctrine to criminalise same-sex relations and legitimise the country's queerphobic policies. This paper examines Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) to demonstrate the ways in which Nigerian political leaders weaponise what Myra Mendible (2016) calls "stigmatised shame" in their efforts to deter the manifestation of queer identities and to render queer subjectivities docile. Focusing on Okparanta's main character, Ijeoma, I explore the ways in which she resists docility enforced through Bible lessons and imagines queer freedom through a subverted reading of biblical scriptures. I argue that this subversion of scriptures often widely read as condemnation of queer subjectivities illuminates ways in which their normative interpretations are confined to adopted imperial heteronormative formulations. I further argue that Ijeoma's subverted reading highlights Christian theology's intentional resistance to understanding conceptual resources needed in the formulation of well-rounded queer subjectivities—an understanding that would espouse their legitimacy—and in turn delineates them to condemnation. I contend that the novel's interrogation of shame, weaponised through biblical scriptures and inherent in contemporary conceptual resources that inform Christian ideology, intercepts its effects that lead to religious traumatisation.

Introduction

In January 2014, Nigeria's then president, Goodluck Jonathan, signed into law the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act which only recognises heterosexual marriage in the country. This piece of legislation similarly prohibits queer[1] social clubs and societies, and anyone found to contravene the law faces up to ten years imprisonment. Ukah (2016, p.25) highlights

"I examine the trauma experienced by Ijeoma, the protagonist, at the hands of her mother's Christian values and religious visions which she imparts on her with the aim to hinder her exploration of same-sex intimacy."

that the Act is "perhaps the only political issue that a coalition of Muslims and Christians, as well as a significant number of civil society organisations in the country, have shown unanimous agreement". Ukah further underlines the fact that Pentecostal communities had great influence on President Jonathan's signing into law the state-sanctioned homophobia (2016). This intersection of religion and politics is attributed to the "loss of credibility in the political process by a large segment of the citizenry" which "compels politicians to seek their citizens' confidence and assurance by liaising with charismatic prophetic figures and relying on prophecies for state governance" (Ukah 2016, p.22). As such, politics in Nigeria are intricately linked to religion and those who adhere to religious beliefs have better chances of participating in the country's political and economic climate. These individuals also stand a chance of receiving benefits as citizens, benefits that are not accorded their queer counterparts who question the use of religion to legitimise policies that contain the expression of queer subjectivities.

Considering that religion is weaved into Nigeria's social fabric and is used to control queer Nigerians, this paper focuses on Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), a novel that similarly indicts religion in the erasure of queer Nigerian people. I examine the trauma experienced by Ijeoma, the protagonist, at the hands of her mother's Christian values and religious visions which she imparts on her with the aim to hinder her exploration of same-sex intimacy. To achieve this, I draw from Michelle Panchuk's (2020) theorisation of religious trauma and its accompanying causal factor, hermeneutical injustice. I argue that Adaora, Ijeoma's mother, through re-inscribing religious scriptures and doctrine—and forcing Ijeoma to consume them in her attempt to render Ijeoma's 'deviant' body docile—results in religious trauma that counteracts the maturation of Ijeoma's sexual identity. I further demonstrate that religious trauma achieves efficacy through its attendant, hermeneutical injustice, that Adaora effects through biblical scriptures imbued with what Mendible (2016) terms "stigmatised shame".

Much reception of the novel has tended to focus on the confluence of Nigeria's nationalism, its production of state sanctioned homophobia and the novel's resistance of heteronormative nationalistic ideals (Manzo 2018; Osinubi 2018; Navas 2021). Courtois (2018) and Lockwood (2022) slightly deviate from this theme to attend to the demystification of the bildungsroman genre as rooted in androcentrism and read *Under the Udala Trees* as a female bildungsroman whose female same-sex loving protagonist is imbued with a voice and agency that challenges Nigeria's patriarchal and queerphobic rhetoric. Cruz-Gutierrez (2022) similarly attends to this demystification but remains focused on the effect of Nigeria's nationalism on queer Nigerian individuals through reading the novel as a "bildungsromance" that ruptures romanticised customary laws imposed on Nigerian women and essential to Nigeria's nation building project. This theme of womanhood and motherhood is similarly pursued by Umezurike (2021) and Mabunda (2023) who argue that Okparanta's protagonist challenges the building blocks that make up the imagined Nigerian nation through her defiance of traditional definitions of womanhood and motherhood that currently buttress Nigeria's nationhood. This paper is indebted to these authors' analyses of the nexus between Nigeria's nation building project, gender, sexuality and motherhood and the resultant state

sanctioned queerphobia through queerphobic policies. However, I aim to contribute to the growing area of study that is attentive to disruptive methods realised by queer African people through a re-storying of the Bible in their attempt to shear off the continuous cycle of harm normative interpretations of the Bible enable (van Klinken et al. 2021). Writing particularly about *Under the Udala Trees*, van Klinken and Chitando (2021) and Stiebert (2024) have observed that biblical scriptures have not only been reinterpreted by queer African people to refute normative misreadings that delegitimise their queer subjectivities, but the scriptures' reinterpretations have been noted to hold liberatory potential and are a source of queer affirmation.

At the end of the novel, Okparanta provides an author's note that reveals the novel's intention of rehistoricising queer subjectivities in a country that seeks to erase queerness from its historical lineage. The note similarly indicts religion in these attempts at erasure. My analysis hinges on this note to highlight the ways in which traditional interpretations of biblical scriptures are permeated with shaming mechanisms that impede queer individuals' access to necessary conceptual resources needed in the formulation of well-rounded queer identities. I contend that *Under the Udala Trees,* as a creative work that exposes the stigmatised shame inherent in conceptual resources employed by Christianity, intercepts the shame's intended effect of stultifying queer subjectivities and throws its objective into turmoil.

Religious trauma and hermeneutical injustice in *Under the Udala Trees*

Under the Udala Trees is a coming-of-age novel centered on the character of Ijeoma, who, throughout the narrative, is at pains to live a fulfilling life outside the docility that often governs queer Nigerians. The narrative, set prior to, during and after the Nigerian civil war, traces the ways in which Christianity is a catalyst for the violence and shame Ijeoma experiences throughout her coming of age. After her father dies during the civil war, Adaora, decides that Ijeoma should stay with family friends; the grammar school teacher and his wife. It is during Ijeoma's stay with them that she meets Amina and an attraction is sparked. When one day the grammar school teacher finds Ijeoma and Amina in bed, he returns Ijeoma to her mother. Upon Ijeoma's return, Adaora subjects her to Bible lessons aimed at cleansing her body of the devil responsible for her same-sex attraction. Years after the civil war, Ijeoma meets Ndidi and they fall in love. Due to societal pressure and threats of violence, Ijeoma capitulates to the heteronormative ideality envisaged for her by Adaora and marries her childhood friend Chibundu. However, Ijeoma finds no respite in the marriage as she is subjected to spousal violence. Towards the end of the narrative, Adaora seemingly comes to terms with Ijeoma's sexuality and a family is envisaged between Ndidi, Ijeoma, Ijeoma's daughter and Adaora.

Okparanta's novel defies what Dunton (1989) has called a "sustained outburst of silence" that haunts queer subjectivities in the African continent through writers' neglect of queerness' historical context. Setting the novel within the context of the Biafran war, *Under the Udala Trees* questions Nigeria's heteronormative nation-building project that seeks to erase queer subjectivities from the country's historical lineage. *Under the Udala Trees* thus can be categorised as part of what Green-Simms (2023) has termed "emergent" literature that consists of the "polyphony" that characterises the wave of third generation Nigerian writers. These are writers intentional in writing stories that centre queer characters, stories that are about "love, joy, and heartbreak of African men who love men and women who love women" (Green-Simms 2023, p.141). This literature deviates from the stereotypical and violent portrayal of queer Nigerians as espoused by most Nollywood films (Green-Simms 2023). Similarly, in their analysis of *Under the Udala Trees*, Lockwood (2022) pays attention to its focus on the intersection between colonisation, religion and continued violent efforts to suppress same-sex intimacies in the African continent, particularly in Nigeria. Lockwood's examination rests on the urgent need to question the various ways religious orthodoxy has been used in women, queer and African people's subjugation as an effect of colonisation. Such examination is important as it contributes to the study of "the history of harm and harm reduction" necessary for understanding conditions that hinder the maturation of queer subjectivities (Lockwood 2022, p.7).

I examine Ijeoma's relationship to the Christian religion and illustrate that Ijeoma's encounter results in religious trauma that hinders her full

understanding of her same-sex attraction and renders her subjectivity docile. In order to achieve this, I draw from Panchuk's (2020) theorisation of religious trauma. Panchuk defines religious trauma as "a broad category of traumatic experiences that include (but is not limited to) putative experiences of the divine being, religious practice, religious dogma, or religious community that transform an individual in a way that diminishes their capacity for participation in religious life" (2020, p.2). In her theorisation, Panchuk (2020) identifies three interconnected phases that inform each other and characterise religious trauma. The initial phase consists of an individual experiencing trauma from an entity directly informed by religion. Secondly, the individual identifies religion as having contributed to the manifestation of the traumatic encounter through religion's inability to hinder the existence of said entity whilst providing fertile space for the experience to occur, even encouraging such traumatic encounters through religious practices. Lastly, the religion or symbols and practices associated with the religion evoke and replicate the individual's trauma. Panchuk further asserts that as a result, the "survivor may be distrustful of God and religious communities, [. . .] or believe that they are doomed to be rejected by religious individuals" (2002, p.2). As such, they "might experience intrusive memories triggered by religious practices, feel extreme fear, distrust, or revulsion towards the divine being, or even internalise a deep sense of shame as the result of religious doctrines" (Panchuk 2020, p.2). For Ijeoma, intrusive memories lead to dreams that cause panic. Distrust and revulsion of the doctrine inform her questioning of biblical scriptures whilst offering careful alternative interpretations. Shame and fear inform her capitulation to heteronormativity towards the end of the narrative when she marries Chibundu. This affect emanates from Adaora's biblical teachings and the resultant religious trauma.

Moreover, religious trauma derives sustenance from its attendant, hermeneutical injustice. Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resources" (2007, p.155). By hermeneutical resources Fricker (2007) refers to the resources that underscore the socialisation of individuals, that aid in deciphering meaning during social interactions and inform their complete understanding of the world. Structural identity prejudice on the other hand refers to "prejudices against individuals in virtue of their social identity that manifest not only in individuals attitude but in the very ways that societies are structured" (Panchuk 2020, p.5). Because we live in an unequal world, the powers that be—through inflecting their social power and resources for their own end—determine the terms in which subjugated individuals are socialised. For example, socialisation can take place through biased knowledge production that distorts marginalised individuals' experience of the world. This can further be evidenced through the ways in which Christian religious leaders, through religious imperialism, are equipped with the social power to influence how individuals are socialised within religious settings. Indeed, Panchuk highlights that "we should expect that there are areas of the religious lives of marginalised groups where middle-class, cis-gender, straight, Christian, adult, white men have little motivation to achieve a proper understanding" (2020, p.10). Said similarly writes that "[t]he power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (1994, p.xiii). This power imbalance means that those who occupy the upper echelon hardly put resources into understanding the experiences of those whose social power disadvantages, and

> "Ijeoma depends on her parents for conceptual resources necessary to understand the world."

when they do, precision is not sought after (Fricker 2007, p.152). The lack of due diligence means that subaltern groups are often not equipped with the necessary conceptual resources that could positively inform their subjecthood or the negotiation of new identities (Panchuk 2020, p.5). This caters to the erasure of their world experience whilst the experiences of those who wield social power remain privileged. It is a result of this power imbalance that prominent interpretations of biblical scriptures in Nigeria do not espouse queer subjectivities.

Ijeoma depends on her parents for conceptual resources necessary to understand the world. With Ijeoma's father having passed on during the war, Adaora dictates this epistemic lens. Through the Bible lessons, Adaora presents skewed, religiously informed hermeneutical resources that replicate traditional heteronormative understanding of the Bible with the aim to hinder the full development of Ijeoma's sexual identity. Adaora's interpretation of biblical scriptures thus bears no effort to understand Ijeoma's same-sex attraction. Put differently, Adaora turns to conceptual resources that replicate heteropatriarchal notions of womanhood and dictate the lives of those who practice Christianity in her aim to cleanse Ijeoma's 'deviant' body. The skewed interpretation of biblical scriptures shames Ijeoma's same-sex attraction and limits access to hermeneutical resources that would aid her understanding of her sexual identity. As such, through Adaora's Bible lessons, stigmatised shame is weaponised to facilitate "a *hermeneutical* environment conducive of religious traumatisation" (Panchuk, 2020, p.12, emphasis in original). Johnson and Moran caution against the use of shame as a disciplinary tool in the socialisation of children as shame often carries patriarchal "cultural and social expectations" that can limit children's access to conceptual resources necessary for the development of well-rounded identities (2013, p.7). As the sole parent responsible for Ijeoma's socialisation, Adaora wields this power to the maintenance of patriarchy and religious orthodoxy whilst restricting Ijeoma's agency.

Resisting stigmatised shame and religious trauma in *Under the Udala Trees*

The first time we bear witness to Ijeoma's religious trauma is through her remembrance of moments after her return to Aba to stay with her mother, shortly after the incident with the grammar school teacher. These are moments where, aware of the cause of Ijeoma's return, Adaora subjects her to Bible lessons aimed at cleansing her soul of the evil she believes to be responsible for Ijeoma's 'indecent' behaviour with Amina.

Ijeoma gestures to her traumatisation when she states that:

> Sometimes I think back to the year 1970–the year the lessons began–and it feels like I'm reliving it all over again in my mind: sitting rigidly at the kitchen table with mama, or in the parlor, my heart racing inside of me, my mind struggling to digest the verses, turning them inside out and upside down and sideways, trying hard to understand. (Okparanta 2015, p.59)

Ijeoma struggles to bury the memories of the Bible lessons and relieves them "all over again" (Okparanta 2015, p.59). The ultimate signifier of the trauma is when, even after her attempts at forgetting, Ijeoma asserts that "still, I remember" (Okparanta 2015, p.59). The haunting experienced by Ijeoma stems from the shame of her same-sex attraction deeply inculcated in her through biblical scriptures.

These haunting memories of the Bible lessons also return after Ijeoma meets Ndidi, the school teacher, where envisaged joyful moments loom and seem like a possibility. Ijeoma recounts that:

> Memories of my Bible studies with Mama rushed back to me yet again, no matter how much I tried to put them away from my mind. Condemning words falling upon my consciousness like a rainstorm, drenching me and threatening to drown me out. I was the happiest I had been in a long time, but suddenly here was this panicked dream, as if to mockingly ask me how I could even presume to think happiness was a thing within my reach. (Okparanta 2015, p.195)

The Christian hermeneutical resources that Adaora taps into to socialise Ijeoma—the scriptures and theological concepts that she wields to render same-sex attraction a sin—do not envisage a joy-filled life for same-sex desiring women. These memories are similarly accompanied by depressive thoughts overt when Ijeoma contends that the dreams were a stark reminder of an unhappy life she would live as a queer woman. This forlorn

“This shame is weaponised by Adaora to reduce Ijeoma’s body to traditional definitions of womanhood—that of procreating and being homemakers.”

conceptualisation of life for queer people—a life filled with violence and shame as forced upon her imagination by Adaora—discourages Ijeoma’s envisioned life outside the gender binary.

As noted briefly above, shame is a crucial tool that stems from the hermeneutical resources Adaora taps into in her socialisation of Ijeoma. Shame is easily accessible because “female sexuality figures as a site and source of shaming” (Johnson and Moran 2013, p.2). This is because “historically, women have been defined as corporeal in a way that men are not, and the female body thus a critical locus for discourses and representations that link femininity with shame” (Johnson and Moran 2013, p.10). Shame finds pride of place in Ijeoma’s body as it is already “socially inferiorised” (Bartky 1990, p.9). In other words, Ijeoma experiences shame in double fold; as a woman but also from the religious scriptures that shame her sexuality. This shame is weaponised by Adaora to reduce Ijeoma’s body to traditional definitions of womanhood—that of procreating and being homemakers.

This aim is visible from their first lesson when Ijeoma is forced to read from Genesis chapter one where God forms a being from Adam’s rib and Adam proclaims that the being shall be called a woman. Adaora repeats the part where the verse says a man and a woman shall become one. She asserts, “man and wife. Adam and Eve. I ne ghe nti? Are you listening” (Okparanta 2015, p.67). The notion that a woman emanates from a man’s rib sustains and advances heteronormativity and inequality respectively. The verse that Adaora reads for Ijeoma is fundamental in the inculcation of women’s subserviency in religious settings. Indeed, such a principle is noted by Elizabeth Johnson who highlights that discourse around Adam and Eve sustains gender hierarchy and legitimise women’s subordination in society (2002, p.5). Through her reading of this verse to Ijeoma, Adaora does not only attempt to dissuade Ijeoma from same-sex relations and intimacy but also reproduces the belief that women are auxiliary to men.

The attempt to render Ijeoma’s body docile is also visible in another scene subsequent to Amina, Ijeoma’s first love, getting married to a man. Adaora wields Amina’s marriage to warn Ijeoma that her time is running out and that she also needs to secure a husband. Adaora holds that:

> Marriage has a shape. Its shape is that of a bicycle. Doesn’t matter the size or color of the bicycle. All that matters is that the bicycle is complete, that the bicycle has two wheels.
>
> “The man is one wheel,” she continued, “the woman the other. One wheel must come before the other, and the other wheel has no choice but to follow. What is certain, though, is that neither wheel is able to function fully without the other. And what use is to exist in the world as a partially functioning human being?” (Okparanta 2015, p.182)

This view is also held by both the grammar school teacher and his wife when they meet Ijeoma the first time and assert that her fair skin will easily get her married off to a man. Adaora, together with the grammar school teacher and his wife, draw such a notion from a lineage of Christian religious scripts that privilege men at the expense of women. Indeed, as noted by Johnson, this religiously informed architecture of the world by men for men is visible “in ecclesial creeds, doctrines, prayers, theological systems, liturgical worship, patterns of spirituality, visions of mission, church order, leadership, and discipline” (2002, p.4).

This shaming phenomenon is further evident when Adaora cites and repeats Genesis two verse twenty-four to shame Ijeoma’s sexuality. Adaora asserts,

"a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Okparanta 2015, p.67). The verse buttresses Adaora's subjectivity as a woman and its hold is visible when she utters under her breath that "a woman without a man is hardly a woman at all" (Okparanta 2015, p.182). It is a result of such religious and patriarchal conditioning that Adaora finds it most effective to weaponise shame in her attempt to hinder the maturation of Ijeoma's same-sex attraction and render her body docile.

The effects of this stigmatised shame are seen through Ijeoma's inability to experience sexual pleasure as a queer woman. The first time Ijeoma experiences debilitating shame around her own pleasure is when she and Amina are caught pleasuring each other by the grammar school teacher. Upon his realisation, the grammar school teacher puts down the lantern he is holding and picks up the Bible that lies atop the table, "[A]n Abomination" he says "that is what it is, if a name is to be given to it! That is what the Bible calls it!" (Okparanta 2015, p.125). Ijeoma likens this shameful experience of feeling naked in front of a male figure to that of Eve when she stood naked in front of God. This incident, as the grammar school teacher paces about, shaming their sexual intimacy, marks the genesis of Ijeoma's shame.

The second scene where Ijeoma struggles with shame is when she has just returned from Ndidi's place and is "swollen with desire" (Okparanta 2015, p.194). Although aware that her mother is in the next room, Ijeoma struggles to hold back and pleasures herself. However, to do so, she first banishes her mother's teachings of Ona from the Bible and how God took his life for wasting his seeds. At the center of Adaora's notion that sex is for procreation also lies the belief that women are not supposed to derive pleasure from sexual intimacy. Thus, the notion that self-pleasure is a sin had previously dissuaded Ijeoma from reveling in self-pleasure. Once Ijeoma is done, she feels "not an ounce of guilt accompanying" the act (Okparanta 2015, p.194). The lesson on Ona carried shaming mechanisms and in banishing it Ijeoma experiences sexual liberation.

Adaora's shaming tactics mimic those wielded by Nigerian political and religious leaders in the suppression of queer subjectivities. Because Nigerian political leaders rely on religious support for political gain, and to maintain this support, they extrapolate distorted religious doctrine to inform their leadership of the nation. Given that these leaders possess privilege as men and leaders of religious groups, they also have little interest in engaging the "hermeneutical resources that marginalised [queer Nigerian] communities have already developed" (Panchuk 2020, p.6). As a result, Nigerian women and queer people become the "victims of contributory injustice and willful hermeneutical ignorance" (Panchuk 2020, p.6). Further, as Panchuk notes, "because some Christians believe that submission to suffering is a way of becoming more like their atoning savior, silent submission to abuse is sometimes endorsed or even demanded" (2020, p.6). Solidarity is wielded and maintained through this silent submission. As such, state and religious leaders can mobilise religious communities to reach into their violent hermeneutical resources in order to shame individuals who live outside the strictures of religious texts. In the novel, this is exemplified by the group of religious fanatics who, upon discovering that Ijeoma's queer circle uses the church as a social gathering space, burn Adanna outside the church as a warning to the others—I explore Adanna's scene in detail below. Adaora is similarly ensnared into silent submission and participates actively in this cultural economy of prescribed behaviors and expectations and plays a pivotal role in transmitting it to Ijeoma.

However, throughout the narrative, Ijeoma meets her mother's advances with resistance. Ijeoma attempts to offer alternative readings of the Bible scriptures and in doing so, exposes some of the hypocrisies that inform the conceptual resources people who practice the Christian religion live by. In one of their earlier lessons, Adaora is stuck on the verse where God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah because sodomites wanted to have sexual relations with Lot's visitors. Lot in turn offers his daughters before the men in effort to prevent sodomites from sleeping with his visitors. Adaora reads Lot as a kind man who, instead of offering his visitors to be done the will of the Sodomites, offers his daughters. In this way, prevents the ungodly acts Sodomites were prepared to execute on his visitors. Adaora contends that Lot is "a good man" and that he "was willing to protect his guests from sin" (Okparanta 2015, p.73). Ijeoma interjects to

counter this normative reading and suggests that it might be a lesson on hospitality; "the idea that he was willing to put in danger his own belongings, and that he was willing to risk the welfare of his own family members in order to safe-guard his guests. It could have been a lesson on hospitality" (Okparanta 2015, p.74). Ijeoma imagines the myriad lessons that could be taken away from the verse and questions the privileging of the prevention of same-sex acts as the core moral lesson. In subverting this normative reading, Ijeoma rejects traditional religious doctrine and how it is meant to guide her life. In this way, Ijeoma refuses the docility forced upon her body.

Efforts to expand her analysis of certain verses in the Bible are repeated in another scene where Ijeoma has just completed a Bible lesson with her mother. She wonders about the infinite readings that could delineate the story of Adam and Eve and questions the privileging of the normative narrative. Ijeoma reflects: "[J]ust because the Bible recorded one specific thread of events, one specific history, why did that have to invalidate or discredit all other threads, all other histories? Woman was created for man, yes. But why did that mean that woman could not also have been created for another woman? Or man for another man?" (Okparanta 2015, p.83).

Ijeoma's questions gesture to the fact that normative interpretations of the story are self-serving to particular groups. She questions the extent to which Christian orthodoxy has produced and sustained problematic readings of certain Bible scriptures in effort to validate certain hermeneutical resources that Christian followers lead by. I contend that Ijeoma's refusal to adopt Christian hermeneutical resources that govern her mother's life to inform her subjectivity—and through constructing different interpretations of the Biblical allegories she encounters—interrupts the shame she is made to feel. Ijeoma refuses to read the Bible as a single story that denounces queer subjectivities and reads it as a text filled with multiple meanings (van Klinken and Chitando 2021). Indeed, van Klinken and Chitando (2021, p.13) have identified a trend in which "African lgbti people and communities at a grassroots level identify with and are empowered by religious faith; how they negotiate spaces within Christian communities; and how they develop affirming theologies". Ijeoma refuses to internalise the negative qualities that accompany normative interpretations of biblical scriptures and instead offers alternative interpretations that subvert their intended effects.

This internalisation of negative qualities plays out differently through Amina's narrative. While at boarding school, after Amina and Ijeoma reunited, Amina dreams about the cataclysm that will befall earth as recorded in the book of Revelation. This becomes a turning point for Amina as she relents and adopts the conceptual resources hammered in them at Sunday schools and school revivals. This capitulation paves way for her lack of social agency. As Amina's same-sex attraction is inherent, religion cannot cleanse or cure it. The teachings from the Sunday school and school revivals only lead to her religious traumatisation. The trauma Amina experiences translates into religiously informed dreams that instill fear and shame which results in her submission. It is shame, compounded by fear, that alters Amina's trajectory. Mendible aptly articulates this phenomenon when she writes that "the coercive power of shame consistently works its magic on the bodies of women, especially where sexuality is concerned" (2016, p.16). Both Amina and Ijeoma experience "hermeneutical

"[J]ust because the Bible recorded one specific thread of events, one specific history, why did that have to invalidate or discredit all other threads, all other histories?"

marginalisation" and are exposed to "skewed hermeneutical resources" through their encounter with religion (Panchuk 2020, p.11).

As the narrative progresses, Ijeoma similarly capitulates and marries a man. However, Ijeoma's turning point occurs when she witnesses Adanna's dead body; an incident that feeds her temporary separation with Ndidi and the queer women's social gathering. The incident threatens violence onto Ijeoma's body and instills fear. Adanna's death is an apt example of what Gqola theorises as the "female fear factory", and the burning of Adanna's body is a "theatrical and public performance of patriarchal policing of and violence towards women" (2021, p.19). In response to the fear instilled in her, Ijeoma yields to her mother's desires and marries her childhood friend Chibundu. Ijeoma yields to heterosexual marriage to shield her life from the violence she had witnessed perpetrated on Adanna, the same form of violence that Ndidi had recounted to her about Adanna's two male friends who were beaten to death by the community. The religious trauma that haunts her and the deaths of queer people that had become an everyday occurrence culminate in Ijeoma surrendering to heterosexual marriage. This desire for the semblance of safety carried by heterosexual relationships is visible when Ijeoma states that "I *did* want to be normal. I did want to lead a normal life. I *did* want to have a life where I didn't have to constantly worry about being found out" (Okparanta 2015, pp.220-221, emphasis in original). The repetition of being "normal" and leading a "normal life" stem from childhood inculcation steadfast in carving her queer subjectivity as deviant (Okparanta 2015, pp.220-221). This is because Ijeoma never encountered "conceptual resources necessary to understand God as embracing [her] in a way that encompasses [her] sexual identity" (Panchuk 2020, p.12). The Bible lessons were unwavering in asserting the abnormality of her sexual attraction.

Ijeoma's marriage fails to be a haven as Chibundu subjects her to both physical and sexual violence. After Ijeoma bears him a daughter, and after finding out that she is still in love with her ex, Ndidi, Chibundu gives her an ultimatum; she needs to bear him a son to pass on his family name and he promises to let her live her life with Ndidi. Here Chibundu taps into the same hermeneutical resources basket as Adaora to recite the patriarchal notion that sons must carry on the family name and women are obliged to participate in the decreed biblical objective to multiply. With Ijeoma's lack of agency, Chibundu enacts violence on Ijeoma in order for her body to serve his desires, to comply to its 'natural objective' in the institution of heterosexual marriage:

> In the darkness, I watched as his murky, monster-like face came square above mine. His hands found their way to mine as he twisted the blanket out of my hold.
>
> "The sooner we get to it, the sooner we'll be done," he said.
>
> I stiffened. (Okparanta 2015, p.274)

The scene above portrays Ijeoma's rigidity and unwillingness to bear Chibundu another child. However, the patriarchal conditioning of their marriage entitles Chibundu to her body. Their marriage serves as an avenue for violence to take place. Chibundu's actions unmask how the hermeneutical resources he taps into enable sexual and physical abuse to go unpunished. In this way, Ijeoma's religious trauma is reproduced as marriage is supposed to be a holy union enshrined before God.

The lack of accountability fuels more violence from Chibundu and Ijeoma begins to feign sleep to evade sexual intimacy with him. When Chibundu catches on, the confrontation turns violent as he calls her a prostitute and throws money at her. Ijeoma, in embracing her mother's normative vision, finds no respite. And although aware of the injustice she suffers, the lack of hermeneutical resources to hold Chibundu accountable makes it difficult to seek assistance.

Surmounting stigmatised shame through *Under the Udala Trees*

In the novel, the former president of Nigeria, Gowon, declares immediately after the civil war that "[t]he tragic chapter of violence has just ended. We are at the dawn of national reconciliation. Once again, we have an opportunity to build a new nation" (Okparanta 2015, p.316). This imagined new nation is devoid of queer subjectivities. Indeed, Lee (2018: 66) contends that "[c]entral to the post-independence nation building projects was the maintenance of a

heterosexual, cissexual, and patriarchal social order, through discourses of 'family values', the promotion of heterosexual monogamous marriage, and continued criminalisation of sexual and gender transgressions". Aware of such nation building objectives, Okparanta centers queer subjectivities at the heart of the Biafran war in effort to displace the heterosexual ideality that informs Gowon's nation building project. In this way, marginalised subjectivities are privileged. Navas puts it aptly when she writes that Okparanta's "exploration of lesbian Nigerian woman(hood) from a literary stance offers a valuable and subversive way of rewriting, re-constructing and re-conceptualising the Nigerian post-nation so that othered subjectivities can also be recognised as part of the nation-building project" (2021, p.112-113). I argue that Okparanta's creative output through *Under the Udala Trees* works to displace the stigmatised shame that inheres in Christian doctrine and orthodoxy. This is in the light of Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark's contention that:

> [t]the writer seeks, through his or her capacity to communicate, nothing short of the surmounting of shame in its destructive aspects. Such a surmounting is the goal of both love and creativity. If severe feelings of shame compel us to hide and conceal inner reality from others and from ourselves, it is often countered in the writer by a creative ideal, a defiant and even ruthless decision not to turn away or to lie, a courageous and almost shameless will to see and to know that which internal and external sanctions conspire to keep us from looking at and exploring. (1999, p.29)

Adamson and Clark's words echo Gqola's words when she states that theorising the "female fear factory" came from the recognition of urgency in "questioning it [. . .] as is interrupting it and making it strange" (2021, p.19). The urgency that informs Gqola's theorisation similarly informs my questioning of the exploitation and weaponisation of shame by African state and religious leaders in their maintenance of structures of heteronormativity. Rendering strange the stigmatised shame that befalls queer African people provides an opportunity "to create new ways of living" (Gqola 2021, p. 19). Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* is courageous in its effort to interrupt the weaponisation of stigmatised shame in order to imagine liberating ways of existing for not only queer Nigerians, but Africans at large.

Conclusion

In the epilogue, Ijeoma and Ndidi have rekindled their relationship and each night they spend together, Ndidi imagines and maps the contours of a town where queerness and queer intimacy flourish unencumbered and where love transcends imagined ethnic boundaries. When Ijeoma asks for the name of this town, Ndidi provides names of the different towns that make-up the Nigerian nation. I conclude that the potential to realise Ndidi's envisaged Nigerian nation partially lies in the examination of the consequences that emanate from the weaponisation of shame by both Nigerian religious and state leaders. It is crucial that attention is paid to the manipulation of affect for the maintenance of a heteronormative Nigerian nation. This is because heteronormativity is similarly maintained "through emotions that shape bodies as well as worlds" (Ahmed 2004, p.146). Cognisant of this, my discussion has illustrated the ways in which traditional interpretation of the Bible is permeated with shame that is wielded to render Ijeoma's body docile. However, through offering subverted interpretations of the Bible, Ijeoma interrupts the shame she is meant to experience and throws its objective into turmoil. Moreover, I contend that *Under the Udala Trees*—a creative output aware of the shame inherent in Christianity's conceptual resources and ways in which it is wielded to stifle the expressions of queer subjectivities—interrupts and renders it strange to imagine liberatory ways of inhabiting the world for queer Nigerian individuals. This is a step toward the realisation of Ndidi's envisaged nation.

Notes

1 I am cognisant of contestation around the term "queer" and its accompanying theory. However, I adopt this umbrella term as placeholder to name gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identities. I use "queer" in this paper to refer to "anyone who feels marginalised by mainstream visions of sexuality" (Morris 2000,

p.21). For a nuanced consideration of the subject, see Davids, N. and Matebeni, Z. (2017); Johnson, E.P. (2001); Matebeni, Z. and Msibi, T. (2015); and Morris, M. (2000).

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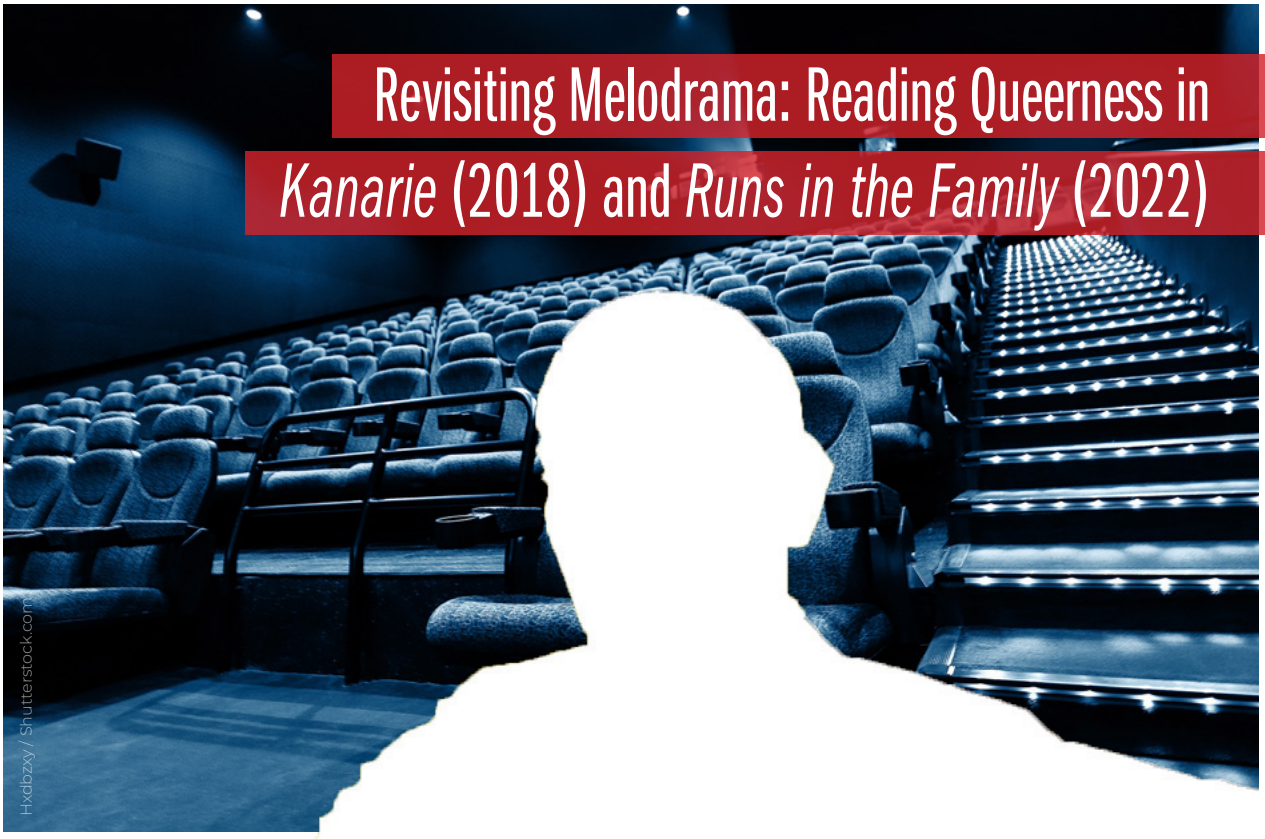
Revisiting Melodrama: Reading Queerness in *Kanarie* (2018) and *Runs in the Family* (2022)



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By Andy Carolin

Abstract

This article focuses on two post-apartheid melodramatic films that engage with the experiences of queer characters. While melodrama is often dismissed as a less serious and less sophisticated cinematic genre, I argue that it can be powerfully used to problematise dominant cultural discourses around gender and sexuality. In this article, I demonstrate that analyses of films that pay close attention to the generic features of melodrama can generate alternative readings of these films. Firstly, I focus on Christiaan Olwagen's Afrikaans film *Kanarie* (Canary) and argue that, despite the hypervisibility of its oppressive context, the film maps the outlines of a utopic queer cultural politics. Secondly, I analyse Ian Gabriel's *Runs in the Family* (2022), a largely neglected film that centres the experiences of its transgender protagonist. While this film initially appears to model a progressive and trans-inclusive worldview, I argue that it ultimately scripts a conservative family drama that inadvertently reinscribes the legitimacy of the dominant gender order.

Introduction

There has been a significant number of queer films released in South Africa over the past decade and a half. But many of these, especially those that have received sustained popular and scholarly attention, have tended to adopt realist modes that depict tragedy, in which a protagonist navigates moral quandaries in the context of daily life, often mapping the tragic outcomes that flow from their closeted lives, and thus revealing themselves to be morally flawed (and therefore complex) characters. One thinks, for example, of Francois's attempted rape of Christiaan at the end of Oliver Hemanus's *Skoonheid* (Beauty) (2011), Xolani's murder of Kwanda at the end of John Trengove's *Inxeba: The Wound* (2018), and Janno's apparent suicide at

the end of Etienne Kallos's film *Die Stropers* (The Harvesters) (2018). Realist films focusing on tragic queer characters – itself a long-standing trope in western queer cinema – tend to be privileged over other narrative genres, as somehow more sophisticated works of storytelling, somehow more demonstrative of the difficulties of queer life. This dismissive attitude towards melodrama is not limited to queer films, and is a broader current within South African film studies (Van der Hoven and Arnott 2009). While the genre itself has adapted to new audiences and technologies, it has not lost its connotative marking as lower form of art, somehow easily delineated from high art forms. Being deemed melodramatic is a seemingly uncontested slur in contemporary cultural criticism. For some South African film critics, melodrama might be associated with poor acting that someone unfortunately "laps[es]" into (Evans 2007, p.272) or shorthand for an "improbable" (Philips 2007, p.318) series of plot developments. There is, in this line of criticism, an unmasked and unproblematised disdain for the genre that inevitably obscures its analytical range and impact.

Within South African cultural studies, there is an often-unproblematised disdain for cinematic, dramatic and literary texts that depict moral certainty, binary moralism, and psychologically tropic characters (hero, villain, etc). This resistance can be traced back to Sachs's (1990) and Ndebele's (2006) evocations in the late 1980s to resist the strategic essentialism and liberation imperatives of much of the artistic and creative work being produced in solidarity with the antiapartheid movement. As van der Hoven and Arnott (2009) have shown, there is an equal resistance in South African scholarship to taking melodrama seriously as a narrative mode. However, as I argue in this article, binary arrangements of characters and themes, as so often characterises melodrama, cannot always be easily conflated with a didactic essentialism, nor can the melodramatic film be said to advance a uniformly conservative sexual politics, as has been suggested (Rooney 2015, p.2; Williams 2016, p.54). Instead, the melodrama itself is a malleable form through which various complex imaginings can circulate. It is also a genre that, despite lacking the hero that usually populates tragic films – the protagonists in the films I analyse are far too two-dimensional for such a designation – they nonetheless pose important questions about the politics of queer representation.

The realist thread in queer films (and film criticism more broadly) tends to underestimate the affective and analytical potential of less realist and somehow more playful and experimental narrative modes. This article focuses especially on melodrama as a queer film genre in South Africa, one that eschews realism's investment in a seemingly unvarnished truth value. In particular, I will focus on two South African cinematic melodramas that foreground queer characters. The first of these is Christiaan Olwagen's Afrikaans film *Kanarie* (Canary) which, while receiving considerable scholarly attention, has almost exclusively been analysed in terms of its engagement with post-apartheid depictions of whiteness (Carolin 2021; Gray 2021; Andrews 2022; Ncube 2023), with arguably inadequate attention paid to its aesthetic features. The second film that I will analyse is Ian Gabriel's *Runs in the Family* (2022), a film that has been entirely overlooked by scholars since its release on film festival circuits and on streaming giant Netflix.

Melodrama

Melodrama as a performative mode has its origins as a popular form of entertainment for the undereducated masses that made up the audiences in the French and British public theatres from the seventeenth century onwards. It was, as a result, historically grounded in "spectacle, excessive dramaturgy and narrative simplicity" (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.15). These characteristics continue today, and the genre is perhaps most often defined in terms of key thematic, narrative and aesthetic features. These include, most notably, moralist binaries between good and evil (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.11), the clear delineation of victims and villains (Williams 2016, p.58), stunning peripeteia (Brooks 1976, p.12) and the exaggerated use of symbolism (Lahiri 2018, p.304). At its core, perhaps, is its "transformation from sensibility to sentimentality" (Loren and Metlemann 2016, p.16). In his oft-cited 1972 essay, Thomas Elsaesser (1991, p.74) argues that "melodrama is a system of punctuation, giving expressive colour and chromatic contrast to the storyline, by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue". A key mechanism through which the sentimental high points are developed is music, and Rooney

(2015, p.1) explains that the very etymology of melodrama gestures to the centrality of music (*melos*) and action (*drama*) as its constitutive components. However, the inclusion of music is, of course, not strictly speaking necessary, given that characteristics of melodrama might also feature in non-performative modes such as prose (Schurch 2024). The use of melodrama to tell queer stories is itself not unique to Olwagen's and Gabriel's films, of course. There has in recent years been a large number of British and American television shows that deploy melodrama's performative sentimentalism to tell queer stories – one thinks, for example, of *Pose*, *The New Normal* (see Joyrich 2022), *The Politician* (see Himberg 2022) and *It's a Sin* (see Duckels 2023).

While "hyperbolic visual and aural elements" (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.11) have been identified as being central aesthetic features of the genre, the melodrama also draws on particular tropic character positionings that are tied to given distributions of virtue and villainy, agency and powerlessness. Although this is most often a triad between victim, villain and hero, this is itself rather flexible. As Loren and Metelmann write in their introduction to *Melodrama after the Tears*:

> Within the victim-villain-hero constellation, the victim and the hero might at times be conflated in one character, and the villain might be embodied in something more abstract than an individual character, such as a social institution or set of conditions. (2016, p.12)

However, the notion of hero that is deployed in discussions of the melodrama are quite different to those that accompany notions of the hero as they take shape in tragedy. As Heilman influentially wrote in *Tragedy and Melodrama*: "In tragedy the conflict is within man; in melodrama, it is between men, or between men and things" (1969, p.72). Williams explains it similarly when she writes that while "tragedy derives from overweening pride, fatal flaws (or at least momentous mistakes), and it depicts divided souls", the heroes within melodramas are "often more wholly victims or villains" (2016, p.58). In other words, while tragedy is "about the conflict within the great soul of the tragic hero" (Williams 2016, p.63) – and one sees this in the agonising and complex descent into rape in *Skoonheid* and murder in *Inxeba* – melodrama is structured around a binary arrangement of principles that are embodied by different characters or sets of characters within institutions. Very often, the characters within melodramas "remain flat due to their primary psychic roles or Manichaean coding [in order to] eliminate moral ambiguity and thus to heighten the potential for a sense of injustice, desire for retributive action and, subsequently, viewer identification with the victim" (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.12).

> "While *Kanarie* might appear to map a rather linear and predictable progression of a gay man's move from secrecy to disclosure within a violently heteronormative context, I argue that the film advances a far more radical utopic queer politics that exceeds the seeming inevitability of apartheid's sexual moralism."

Given the moral absolutism that often characterises the genre, it is a form that lends itself, at least partially, to fixed imaginings of the present and future. Green-Simms, in her study of West African queer films, explains that melodrama is often "designed to stimulate and provoke reactions in

the audience by sensationally depicting religious, social, and moral transgressions" (2012, p.28). There is an especially prodigious body of such melodramas produced by Nollywood in Nigeria that exploit conservative sexual moralism to tell salacious stories in which normative gender and sexuality are momentarily disrupted and then quickly restored (Green-Simms 2022, p.14). While the binary narrative logic of melodrama often lends itself to a legitimisation of the conservativism of the status quo (Rooney 2015, p.2; Williams 2016, p.54; Green-Simms 2012, p.28) – and the genre itself is often dismissed as being unworthy of serious attention (Van der Hoven and Arnott 2009) – I argue that complex and contested cultural politics inhere within melodramatic cinema in ways that far exceed the narrow binary nature of the narrative form. In my analysis of *Kanarie* and *Runs in the Family*, I am especially interested in the different queer cultural politics that circulate in and through the melodrama as an aesthetic mode. While *Kanarie* might appear to map a rather linear and predictable progression of a gay man's move from secrecy to disclosure within a violently heteronormative context, I argue that the film advances a far more radical utopic queer politics that exceeds the seeming inevitability of apartheid's sexual moralism. In contrast, while *Runs in the Family* appears, at first, to offer an affirming and optimistic account of a transgender character's supportive father and diverse queer community, I argue that the film inadvertently advances a conservative worldview that strictly polices traditional gender norms.

Kanarie (2018) and queer utopia

Christiaan Olwagen's film *Kanarie* focuses on the experiences of a group of young conscripts in the South African Defense Force between 1984 and 1986. The protagonist, Johan Niemand, is among a small group of conscripts who are selected to serve in the army's choir, colloquially referred to as the Canaries, from which the film gets its Afrikaans title. Johan, a devoted fan of British music sensations Boy George and Culture Club, is a gay young man who, through the film, engages in a romantic and sexual relationship with another recruit and tentatively comes to accept his own sexuality. It is clear from the first scenes of the film that Johan is inclined towards a queer disruption of gender. The film opens with his younger sisters dressing him in a makeshift wedding dress as he pretends to be a bride. They then coerce him to walk down the street wearing the wedding dress. However, this walk soon transforms into a music video scene, played to the music of Bronkski Beat's "Smalltown Boy" – with its distinct aural blend of falsetto and what has been called "ominous" notes and an "electro-pop pulse" (Gould 2019). The scene cuts between a realist image of Johan clumsily draped in a wedding dress to a more surrealist image of him in highly stylised makeup, armlength gloves and a 1980s jacket as he and a group of choreographed dancers move down the street. The lyrics of the song that are played at this point foreshadow with remarkable prescience Johan's symbolic and anguished journey away from the predictability of heteronormative apartheid society towards an uncertain future:

> You leave in the morning with
> everything you own in a little black case
>
> Alone on a platform, the wind and the
> rain on a sad and lonely face
>
> Mother will never understand why you
> had to leave
>
> But the answers you seek will never be
> found at home
>
> The love that you need will never be
> found at home
>
> Run away, turn away, run away, turn
> away, run away

That this imagined dance sequence is first interrupted by the arrival of the *dominee* (religious minister) and then followed immediately by the arrival of Johan's callup papers for the army highlights, rather obviously, how his failure to conform is punished by the governing system of Christian Nationalism and its statist policing of normative masculinity. The melodramatic mode that is used here at the very outset, in which the character himself transforms into a Boy George caricature and struts down the street, undermines any attempt to read this film as a teleological journey towards gay acceptance, or as Dercksen describes it: "a coming-of-age musical drama set in South Africa in 1985 about a young boy who discovers how [...] the true self can be discovered" (2019). Instead of a neat sense of teleology, this film

marks a stylised juxtaposition and recurring blend of two very different ways of being queer. The film is structured, both thematically and aesthetically, according to a binary logic that distinguishes strictly between a conservative assimilationist white masculine aesthetic, on the one hand – consistent with the "television industry pressures for images of queer life to be simultaneously 'responsible' for sensitive straight audiences and 'respectful' to queer viewers" (Keegan 2016, p.10) – and a far more camp and queer disruptive mode, on the other.

I read the film in terms of Muñoz's work on queer utopia. Writing in *Cruising Utopia*, he argues that queerness offers a way towards a future-orientated utopia that exceeds the narrow normative formulations of the present. In Muñoz's words: "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (2009, p.1). An embrace of queerness offers a space for a more radical queer politics that is built on utopic imaginings of the future and a critique of "the ontological certitude" of what Muñoz criticises as "the politics of presentist and pragmatic gay identity" (2009, p.11). Muñoz draws on Ernst Bloch's distinction between abstract and concrete utopias: whereas an abstract utopia offers a naïve imagining of some idealised place that is untethered to social realities – what Muñoz calls "banal optimism" – concrete utopias are grounded in the realities of the present (2009, p.3). For Muñoz, queer utopias are concretely "relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential". As I argue below, it is within the context of a "historically situated" homophobia that the conditions for a queer utopic imagining of the future becomes visible in Olwagen's film.

The structuring logic of secrecy and disclosure that is so often attendant to narratives of gay characters' identity formation has dominated popular reception of the film (Dercksen 2019; De Barros 2018; Zietsman 2018). However, this is a rather stale and formulaic way of thinking about sexuality that does not quite account for the disruptive ideological work being done by the film. The analytical predominance of the coming out narrative is invested in an assimilationist politics that does not disrupt the normative construction of society itself. After being interrupted during his first clumsy kiss with his love interest, Wolfgang, a look of disgust emerges on Johan's face as the music reaches a dramatic non-diegetic crescendo – itself providing an aural depiction of the character's inner anguish. The scene cuts to the men in the choir standing in church while the chaplain delivers an address to those assembled. True to the melodramatic form, the character's inner turmoil is exteriorised into the chaplain's address itself:

> He [God] declares war between himself and the devil, between light and darkness, between us and them [...] The onslaught is severe. The onslaught is out there. It is in our homes. It is in our streets. It is in this very building. Amongst us.

There is a deliberately ambiguous shift here between two binary worldviews, with Christian Nationalism on the one hand, and the liberation movement on the other. But the visual shifts of the camera onto Johan during this address, which followed on directly from the scene in which Johan and Wolfgang kiss each other, highlights the projection of other moralist binaries in which "the devil", "darkness" and "the onslaught" comes to stand in for non-heteronormative sexualities as well.

This dramatised exteriorisation of the moralist battle between good and evil is again evidenced when the same chaplain, after casually observing a subtle touch between Wolfgang and Johan, takes the young recruits on a drive in his car. The chaplain asks:

> *Chaplain*: Right or wrong? [...] There's a fork in the road, which route should I take? Speak up, boys. There's a fork in the road. Which one do I take?
>
> *Wolfgang*: The one that will take us to our destination.
>
> *Chaplain*: But how do I know which one?
>
> *Johan*: Reverend, we don't know.
>
> *Chaplain*: Choose, men! Right or left? Right or left? Quickly men, otherwise I'll leave it up to God. [*The chaplain starts accelerating quickly*] Dear God. Show these men the right way, Lord.
>
> *Johan*: Reverend, we don't know.
>
> *Chaplain*: Right or left? [*Johan takes the steering wheel to guide the car*]

The chaplain remains vague throughout this encounter, as he maps out a series of binaries,

clearly trying to impress on the young recruits that any same-sex intimacy between them should be considered a complete counterpoint to the path ordained by apartheid nationalism. This scene, the moralistic binaries of the dialogue, and the increasingly dangerous stakes as the chaplain dramatises the urgency of their moral choices, evidences a core aspect of the melodrama that Peter Brooks describes in his classic *The Melodramatic Imagination*. In this, Brooks observes that the melodramatic form stages a clash between erstwhile victims and wrongdoers in which they "confront one another with full expressivity, to fix in large gestures the meaning of their relations and existence" (1976, p.4).

True to form, this scene of rhetorical and psychological violence is soon followed by another scene in which Johan is staying with a host family as the choir travels around the country to perform concerts. One woman, who encourages the boys to flirt and drink alcohol, shows Johan her fashion studio and, after he tries on one of her designs, she says:

> Promise me one thing. [...] As soon as your cage doors open you [must] fly away. Away from this Godforsaken country with all its sirs and madams and rules and regulations and all its hate and its bullies. All its fucking bullies.

The woman's comment about him flying away from the cage – a playful, if obvious, reference to the fact that the group is known as the canaries – marks a counterpoint to the moralism and heteronormativity of the military and its chaplain. This binary works to ensure what Anker refers to as the "moral legibility" that is so central to the genre (2005, p.24). But, unlike the common use of the melodrama to advance conservative sexual moralism and to punish apparent wrongdoers (Rooney 2015, p.2), *Kanarie* evidences an innovative sleight of hand in which it is a moralism predicated on an embrace of queerness and a rejection of heteronormativity – an easily contrasted either/or – that becomes legible to audiences.

After a failed attempt to engage in the typical coming out ritual – Johan is forced to backtrack and withdraw his coming out after his sister says that her husband "would never accept it" – he returns to an empty barracks. But after this failed attempt to perform the ritualistic coming out, the inner conflict within the protagonist becomes exteriorised in a spectacular (in the literal sense of the word) scene of self-harm and exaggerated anguish. After Johan thinks he hears bicycle bells, a sound he has previously established as being a traumatic accompaniment to the bullying he experienced as a child, he puts on the earphones of his Walkman as the sound of Culture Club's "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?" plays in the background. The strobing light effects produce a series of still images as he engages in a choreographed dance sequence that blends militaristic moves of marching with more aesthetically stylised forms that depict agony. As he dances through their dormitory, the scene shows further stills as the beds and linen in the room are slowly overturned and strewn across the room. Although the director of the film has explained that budgetary constraints resulted in a limited number of small sets – and he notes almost regretfully that this may create a "claustrophobic" effect (Marche Media 2018) – it is the very spatialised intensity of this small and often-used setting that contributes to the affective excess of the scene. When Johan wakes up from the surrealist trance, he notices his own blood streaked across the room, and the scene offers an exemplar of how melodrama "exteriorizes conflict and psychic structure" (Brooks 1976, p.35). This spectacular scene depicts his inner turmoil as he must grapple with his sexuality and non-conforming gender identity. It is an emotional peak in the film and demonstrates Williams's framing of the melodrama genre:

> emotional and moral registers are sounded, [the] work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, [and] the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and actions. (1998, p.42)

It is clear that what makes Johan's queerness such an affront to his sense of self is its apparent irreconcilability with his Christian faith. After this surrealist trance scene, he appears, covered in his own blood, at the door of the cottage belonging to Dominee Engelbrecht, a younger and much kinder chaplain – whose positioning as a moral counterpoint to the other chaplain is itself closely tied to the narrative simplicity of the genre. After dramatically reading the definition of homosexuality from the dictionary and the

Biblical injunctions against it, Johan breaks down in despair. It is in his own breaking down – and the physical destruction of his intimate and military space – that evidences what Muñoz's might call "the impoverish[ment] and toxic[icity] for queers of the present" (2009, p.27).

However, in a moment of sudden character development, Johan attempts to blur the apparent split between his queerness and his faith when, as part of the programming committee for the choir, he composes a song that blends music from queer sensation Culture Club with Afrikaans hymns:

> The victims we know so well / they shine in your eyes when we kiss and tell / strange places we never see / but it's sink or swim / like it's always been
>
> [*In Afrikaans*:] All the earth, make joyful noise, raise jubilation from the dust.
>
> And I keep on loving you / it's the only thing to do / when the angels / sing for greater things / and I give them all to you
>
> [*Simultaneously in Afrikaans*:] Praise His name and sing for joy!
>
> Pull the strings of emotion / take a ride into unknown pleasure / feel like a child on a dark night / wishing there was some kind of heaven / I could be warm with you smiling / hold out your hands for a while, the victims, we know them, so well
>
> [*Dramatic music with drums and base guitar*]

It is significant that it is the group of boys who were previously agents in the heteronormative bullying and policing of heteronormative masculinity who comprise the choir who join Johan in this highly charged – even blasphemous, to some – musical arrangement. In this, under Johan's guidance, "the suffering victim [is] turned into a righteous action hero" (Williams 2016, p.54) and the choir itself joins him in enacting "the heroic acts of dramatic heroes, presented as a dramatic spectacle" that is so common to the genre (Kappelhoff 2016, p.81). The film's violent depiction and destruction of Johan's dormitory and the ambiguous blending of two seemingly disparate ideological impulses – anachronistic in the Christian Nationalist military – marks a rejection of the "here and now's totalizing rendering of reality" (Muñoz 2009, p.1) in ways that contain traces of Muñoz's utopic assertion that "we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (2009, p.1). In a somewhat comparable vein, Williams argues that "the aspiration for justice [...] is melodrama's own, most important virtue" (2016, p.74). He adds: "What melodrama can offer at its best is thus something that tragedy cannot supply. It's a vision of a better governmentality" (Williams, 2016, p.74). It is in this, then, that the *breaking down* – of the character, of the setting, of ideological coherence itself – is so central to create the spaces from which Muñoz's "new world" and Williams' "better governmentality" can emerge.

Runs in the Family (2022) and the politics of reassurance

Unlike the queer utopic imaginary that is scripted in *Kanarie*, Ian Gabriel's film *Runs in the Family* employs a melodramatic mode that offers, perhaps inadvertently, a conservative framing of queerness that I am calling a politics of reassurance. Within this mode, normative arrangements of gender and social organisation are shown to be stable and resilient, and audiences are educated as to trans discourses and identities, all the while being *reassured* that trans bodies can be accommodated without any radical disruption of the status quo. In fact, as I discuss below in relation to the end of the film, trans bodies can be sacrificed at the altar of traditional family values. This has echoes of what has been critiqued as transnormativity, in which "some transgender people [are] deemed culturally intelligible and, consequently, offered conditional acceptance within society" (McIntyre 2018, p.10). However, the representational costs of this assimilation invariably depend on the exclusion of those who might not offer a comforting reassurance to cisgender audiences. While critiques of transnormativity tend to centre on the extent to which trans bodies need to conform to specific conditions for legibility, including but not limited to medicalised approaches that see surgery as the *sine qua non* of trans identity (Johnson 2016; McIntyre 2018), I am interested here in a different set of narrative strategies through which a politics of reassurance can be advanced. In this film, these narrative strategies include a textual ghettoisation of queerness, a ridicule and disavowal of ideologi-

“Gabriel’s film covers mostly a three-day period in which River, a transman, travels with his father from Cape Town to Eswatini to rescue River’s biological mother from a rehabilitation clinic.”

cally engaged understandings of gender politics, a didacticism aimed at unassumingly educating cisgender audiences about trans discourses, and grand gestures of self-sacrifice by the trans protagonist in service of the pre-existing gender status quo.

Gabriel’s film covers mostly a three-day period in which River, a transman, travels with his father from Cape Town to Eswatini to rescue River’s biological mother from a rehabilitation clinic. The dialogue is irreverent, the puns are aplenty, the tone is playful, and the plot itself is fast paced. The film incorporates the key tropes of the road trip genre, including an intimate rapport, both diegetic and non-diegetic musical montages, and a series of unlikely obstacles and mistakes that facilitate emotional connection between two or more characters. Central to the melodramatic narrative logic of the film is the dualistic projection of hero and villain onto River’s parents: whereas his father, Varun, is an idealised single father who has uncritically embraced his trans son – and who one characters points out to River “would go to Pollsmoor [Prison] for you” – his biological mother, Monica, abandoned him 23 years earlier as a child, deliberately misgenders him on reuniting, and ultimately steals from him.

True to the genre, the film features “wild swings between pathos and action”, with the action often being used to create sustained farcical and sometimes even slapstick comedic exchanges between the two men (Williams 2016, p.56). This action sees them undertake ever-increasingly laborious tasks: this includes climbing over a fence that they mistakenly believe is the national border fence between South Africa and Eswatini, only then to have to mount the actual border fence, all the while clumsily carrying a large old kilim rug that Varun intends to use as a bribe to ensure Monica’s release from the rehabilitation centre. The two men meet a woman who is driving past – an assertive woman in the tradition of the sassy sidekick – who drives them to the rehabilitation centre and who is then mistakenly embraced by Monica believing her to be her child. The film continues and sees Monica stealing the money that River has saved for his gender-affirming top surgery, re-abandoning her recently reunited family unit, and is later found having sex with Varun’s friend in the backroom of a dingy casino.

Monica is shown to be dismissive towards River’s trans identity, and his intention to participate in a drag competition. In one of her initial observations to Varun about River, she says: “You must be fucking joking. We made a girl who thinks she’s a boy who dresses like a girl? I mean, give me a fucking break”. As the villainous character, it is Monica who drives the affective subtext of loss throughout the film. As Loren and Metelmann explain in relation to the melodrama:

> The plot is typically structured around an agon of loss. The loss may be some combination of the latent, potential, inevitable or already realized. Inter-diegetic tensions that affectively and emotionally engage the viewer are orchestrated through an interplay between initial loss/threat and subsequent action to retrieve or compensate for loss, which is usually accompanied by the further threat of loss. (2016, p.12)

Within the melodrama tradition, Monica’s original abandonment of her young child evidences a loss that is “already realized” – and which is almost unforgivable, within dominant constructs of

parenthood. While River and Monica's tentative steps towards relationship building during the road trip after rescuing her are attempts "to retrieve or compensate for loss", this impetus is quickly dispelled and replaced by the "further threat of loss" (through her acts of re-abandonment and theft) that, through selected flashback scenes, audiences are led to believe was "inevitable". Significantly, it is not only that Monica suddenly disappears from her son's life again, but that she steals his savings in the process. These savings have been set aside to partially pay for River's gender-affirming surgery and Monica's villainy thus reaches new heights as she comes to embody the systemic forces that obstruct trans people's access to medical care. True to the genre, the intense emotional ebbs and flows in *Runs in the Family* are caused not by the downfall of a protagonist through his own flaw, as in tragedy, but rather by an externalised and archetypical antagonist who block the protagonist's efforts towards medicalised self-actualisation.

The film effectively draws on the binary logic of the melodrama in its systematic introduction of the challenges of transphobia, on the one hand, and models an unassumingly inclusive gaze that reorientates viewers towards a progressive reframing of these discourses, on the other. Some of the challenges include logistical travel obstacles, transphobic responses by another man when using a public restroom, and overt hostility from service staff. At one point, as River and Varun are trying to convince the receptionist at the rehabilitation centre that at least one of them has the right to authorise Monica's release, the receptionist says:

> Wait, wait, wait, wait. First, you are not married, then you are married. And your child, who says you are not married, is a girl, then a boy. How must I know if I cannot look inside his or her pants.

In this, the film gives voice to two recurring tropes with which trans visibility circulates, namely the idea that trans people are *fraudulently* misrepresenting themselves (akin to Varun presenting a falsified marriage certificate), and that only medicalised genital-centric proof can resolve the question definitively. However, given River's unquestionable likeability, and audiences presumed empathy for his position, this assertion lacks affective traction within the film, and thus simultaneously scripts and disarticulates this very perspective.

While the film evidences the social context of transphobia, it also offers a more expansive criticism of gender norms that may resonate more broadly. He explains:

> Being trans isn't an artform or a hobby. We're literally a different gender to what some doctor prescribed when they saw either a vulva or a penis and decided okay this one better be pretty but not too pretty or she won't be taken seriously and that one can never cry and always has to pay on dates [...] Boys do cry. We should be allowed that much.

These standard criticisms of gender stereotypes would have critical purchase with many audiences. This monologue offers a non-confrontational and accessible trans perspectives. However, it then shifts to a more ideologically laden assertion, made in a voice that clearly suggests this is a commonly repeated refrain, when River adds: "But no, the binary is a colonial, capitalist, patriarchal tool that is violently oppre –". But this deeper and more engaged criticism of the historicity of gender norms, inherently alienating to many audiences, is conveniently interrupted by a mechanical problem in the car. This moment in the film introduces and then, through ridicule, disavows the far more queerly disruptive framing of gender politics. It is not only this speech's soapboxing tone and River's overstated earnestness that results in this very idea being ridiculed, but it is also through the fact that it is interrupted by the slapstick running gag about a front window that keeps falling. Similarly, the father later attempts to mimic this ideological tone, in a naively earnest assertion to the receptionist that "See, the masculine-feminine binary is a colonial tool that – ". But again, this broader ideological critique is interrupted and ridiculed by the receptionist's sassy response. Though this is, of course, consistent with the comedic tone of the film, questions can still be asked about how this simultaneous invocation and disavowal reveals the film's insincere interest in a broader dismantling of gender constructs as it offers up a complex discourse for easy laughs. If indeed "uncomfortable truth-telling constitutes a central tradition in what we have for a while been calling queer culture", as Kurnick (2020, p.349) suggests, then *Runs in the Family* falls short of this, insisting instead on a reassuring aesthetics that disarms any audience discomfort.

Once they have rescued Monica, River decides that he and his father will participate in a drag competition, the prize money for which they hope will be used to complete River's top surgery. In this, the film offers a rich and affirming mapping of a queer drag culture, a site itself known for its parodic and hyperbolic aesthetic. However, this scene in the drag club is ghettoised, textually separated from the rest of the film. If *Runs in the Family* is to be believed, queer culture is flourishing, but it must do so within the non-threatening space of the club, advancing a politics of reassurance. The space is depicted as being rich in drag aesthetic affects – including hyperbolic makeup and dresses and barbed back-and-forth exchanges between the contestants. It is also depicted as being oddly utopian in its depiction of alternative body forms and politics, including artists wearing Xhosa-inspired dress, voluptuous large-bodied performers, and a performer engaging a distinctly intersectional politics by carrying a Palestinian flag. The scene itself is often didactic. When asked by the judge, Her Vajesty the Queen, why he and his father should win the prize money, River explains that "we believe we should win the grand prize because we have both fought very hard to be ourselves in a world that has not always welcomed us". In this, and elsewhere in the film, River draws parallels between his own experiences of transphobia and his Indian father's experiences of racism during apartheid. There is, in this, a commonly invoked yoking of broader human rights discourses to the moral certitude of the antiapartheid movement. As Frenkel explains: "the idea that things can be fought over and changed is so endemic to South African cultural life that it has become a sort of everyday common sense or an afterlife of a successful revolution" (2017, p.279). Varun contributes to the overall didactic mode when he explains that "while he [River] was showing me how to be a woman, he was teaching me how to be a man". In this, an idealised masculinity, built on courage and integrity, is tied to, rather than divorced from, flexible framings of gender and identity. During their performed dance routine, as River goes from being dressed as Whitney Houston to a male-presenting boy in a white suit, the music moves from Shirley Bassey's "Where Do I Begin?" into Whitney Houston's "How Will I Know" to "Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" and ending with Deniece Williams' "Let's Hear It for the Boy" – a line that serves as the repeated refrain at the end of the performance as the volume and pace builds up to a crescendo. The routine not only draws on canonical queer anthems of Western queer culture but also visualises a transition from femaleness to maleness, with an evocative conclusion that, through the confluence of dress and lyrics, reaffirms River's status as a transman.

"… film offers a rich and queerly inclusive imagining of drag culture, this aspect remains textually segregated from the politics and aesthetics of the rest of the film – a momentarily abstract utopic place."

While the film offers a rich and queerly inclusive imagining of drag culture, this aspect remains textually segregated from the politics and aesthetics of the rest of the film – a momentarily abstract utopic place. After the drag show, River realises that Monica has stolen all the money that

he had saved to pay for the top surgery. Monica thus confirms her place as the villain in the film, not only the woman who abandoned her son as a child but who now has stalled his progress towards gender-affirming surgery. Varun panickily drives around the city looking for her. While Green-Simms argues that melodrama in West Africa often relies on an "aesthetics of outrage", it is important to note that it in the case of *Runs in the Family*, it is Monica's blocking of River's progress that is most generative of outrage, rather than his being transgender (2012, p.28).

The clash between the two binary positions reaches its crescendo when Varun confronts Monica about the theft, and the dialogue between the characters cements her villainy:

> *Monica*: I said I didn't want to be a mother [years ago]. But you kept pushing. [...] I hated the thought of being a mother. But guess what: I'm fucking allowed that. [...]
>
> *Varun*: But why didn't you stay away. Why come back just to steal from him?
>
> *Monica*: I was stolen from first! You imagine carrying someone in your body for nine months, okay? No one fucking pays you for it. And you know what, fuck you!

In this, Monica rejects the codes of compulsory motherhood imposed on women. And for this, she is punished. She is last seen walking down the dark street, alone and maligned. In this, the film engages the "cycles of victimization and retributive violence" (Williams 2016, p.56) that is so central to cinematic melodrama. Within the genre's "dualistic scheme of good and evil" (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.11) that is projected on to River's parents, the film functions as a "legitimation of retributive action to restore virtue" (Loren and Metelmann 2016, p.11). But, despite the filmmaker's best intentions, the virtue being restored here is not that of a queer affirming narrative but rather the conservative codes of motherhood imposed onto women. This bifurcated approach to punishing evildoers and rewarding heroes is further extended when River decides to delay his top surgery in order to stock, decorate and open a new store where his father, a tailor, can make and sell garments. In doing so, River's gender-affirming surgery is subordinated in favour of rewarding a good parent. Audiences are *reassured* that, when it comes to it, the acceptable trans character will substitute their own desires (suddenly recast here as merely nice-to-haves) in favour of a respectful submission to the needs of his parents. River, as the victim-hero, in Loren and Metelmann's (2016, p.12) formulation that I discuss above, thus draws on a conservative logic to win over audiences: the film ends with River's near-perfect father being rewarded, his villainous mother being punished, and the apparent urgency of his own gender-affirming medical care being recast. Unlike *Kanarie*, which might more accurately embody Keegan's praise that queer melodrama reveals "other ways that the world might be, and [how] we might be queer in it", Gabriel's film forecloses on this very potentiality (2016, p.11).

Conclusion

If indeed "melodrama [is] an elastic system that redistributes the visibility of suffering in a community", as Zarzosa suggests, it is also a system that conditions the very terms of that visibility (2012, p.9). Analyses of the films that foreground their melodramatic aesthetics reveal perhaps counterintuitive readings. While *Kanarie* has been read as a teleological narrative that facilitates a bland sense of "self-acceptance" by one reviewer (Zietsman 2018) and as a generic account of "coming of age and coming out" by another (De Barros 2018), I argue that the film invites a far more radical reading that celebrates a disruptive – even destructive – breaking of the "prison house" of the "here and now" in favour of a speculatively indefinite queer utopia (Muñoz 2009, p.1). Similarly, though *Runs in the Family* has been read as "unexpectedly wholesome" and "a sweet little gem" (IMDb 2023) by one reviewer and as "incredibly pleasant" by another (Lipsett 2023), my reading of the film within the conventions of the genre highlights a far more problematic subordination of queerness in favour of an assimilationist narrative of reassurance. Of course, I am not arguing here that all queer films advance *either* queer utopia *or* a politics of reassurance. Such a binary reading would be antithetical to the analytical impulses of queer theory itself. Rather, this article aims to map the alternative readings that come into view if we shift our attention to issues of narrative form, and what implications this may have for thinking through contemporary queer cultural politics.

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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.

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The Lagos Space Programme's Re/construction and Queering of Masculinity

By Khaya Mchunu and Isaiah Negedu

Abstract

There is a growing number of African fashion designers who use their work to contribute to queer artistic production. This article examines how non-gendered forms are viewed concerning fashion styles in sub-Saharan Africa. In doing this, the article considers the narratives in gendered items of clothing. Focusing on the Lagos Space Programme this article incorporates visual and textual analyses of the fashion pieces available on the brand's official *Instagram* page. The article examines the imagery, fashion films, and design statements for different collections as well as the brand's manifestos and interviews with its creative director, Adeju Thompson. This article demonstrates how the projects of this brand are invested in reconstructing, queering, and pluralising African masculinities. This article ultimately highlights how fashion can be a site for contesting the presentation of queer identities and challenging the binary ways of thinking about gender identities.

Introduction

In this article, we examine the fashion work of the Lagos Space Programme under the creative directorship of Adeju Thompson. Despite their growing influence, Thompson's work has attracted minimal scholarly attention. Their work is featured on the cover of the book, *Fashioning the Afropolis: Histories, materialities and aesthetic practices*, a book that deals with the notion of fashion and the city within African studies (Pinther, Kastner and Ndjio 2022). In the introduction to this book, Pinther and Kastner (2022, p.1) characterise Thompson's work as steadily challenging the idea of Nigerian and particularly Lagosian fashion design. Critically, though, Pinther and Kastner state that Thompson's "explorations into past textile and sartorial practices not only led to the creation of new shapes but also

helped to unveil hidden or sidelined societal beliefs and epistemologies" (Pinther and Kastner 2022, p.1). In this article, Thompson's exploration is significant because it proposes a continual expansion of myriad ways in which sartoriality is used to rethink African masculinities. Through the Lagos Space Programme, Thompson contributes to a growing body of work on queer artistic production in Africa which showcases how fashion can serve as a social, cultural, and political practice. Thompson has previously said about their work "I like the idea that people can see my work and expand their visual references of what they think African design is" (Benissan 2023). In an interview with French documentary filmmaker and journalist, Loïc Prigent, Thompson, who identifies as queer and non-binary, elaborates that an important aspect of their work highlights a common misconception that queerness is a Western construct.[1]

In the seminal work, *Queer African Reader*, Ekine and Abbas state that documenting queer lives is about valourising "the complexity of how queer liberation is framed in Africa and by Africans" (2013, p.3). This article sets out to contribute to this scholarly discourse of valourising African lived experiences by using the Lagos Space Programme as a case study. We focus on how Thompson's work evidences a fashion designer's queering specific elements of masculinities in Lagos. Thereby offering and expanding understandings of diverse masculinities that exist in this urban city. Grounded in Lagos, the fashion brand Lagos Space Programme depicts a type of masculinity that draws, in part, from Lagosian, Yoruba, and other external resources. Thus, serving as our primary case study, Thompson's fashion work produces the narrative of re-assessing, pluralising, reconstructing, and queering masculinities through the Lagosian fashion lens. In this article, we focus primarily on four of their collections namely: Project 4: *Gurreilla* (Spring/Summer 2019), Project 5: *Aṣọ Lànkí, Kí Ató Ki Ènìyàn* (Autumn/Fall 2021), Project 7: *Post-Adire* (Autumn/Fall 2023), and Project 8: *Cloth as queer archive* (Spring/Summer 2024). These collections exemplify how fashion can be used to rethink, reimagine, and queer masculinities in an African context.

Re/constructing Masculinities

Considering that this article will discuss the construction of a specific kind of masculinity in Lagos, it is pertinent to examine how masculinities are constructed and imagined in Africa broadly and Nigeria in particular. We acknowledge scholars who contend that within the African continent, as is the case elsewhere, there are various forms through which masculinities are expressed (Morrell and Ouzgane 2005; Uchendu 2008; Ratele 2008; Rothmann 2022). The concept of masculinity is framed around societal beliefs about what it means to be and to perform maleness and manhood. It is both descriptive and prescriptive in the sense that the physical appearance of a man confers some social status. This descriptive and prescriptive nature regards true manhood as something worthy of veneration and respect only when it is drawn from "heteromasculinity" (Ratele 2008, p.26). It is to the effect that one is not virile because he is a man, but one is a man because he is virile.

Masculinity constructed around heteromasculinity brings forth the concept of "hegemonic masculinity", a phrase associated with Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985). Focusing on the African context, Morrell and Ouzgane (2005, p. 4) write about the dangers of hegemonic masculinity and describe it as having "established the cultural ideal for what it was to be a man" (also Fidolini 2024). However, in doing so, it "silenced other masculinities, and combated alternative visions of masculinity" (Morrell and Ouzgane 2005, p.4). As a consequence, there has been a deliberate act in scholarly works to pluralise the word to masculinities to pave the way for other forms of masculinities that are positively construed (See Morrell and Ouzgane 2005; Uchendu 2008; Ratele 2008).

We argue that it is, therefore, possible to be a man and not be masculine. As a result, masculinity as a concept cannot be limited to men who meet some narrow criteria. This is because it is possible to exhibit certain characteristics of masculinity that overshadow other inaccurately and narrowly accepted traits.

Uchendu (2007) is an example of previous scholarly work examining masculinity in Nigeria, closely related to our study context. Uchendu's research on masculinity among Nigerian youth concludes that the expression of masculinity cannot be generalised (Uchendu 2007, p.279). Our study of the Lagos Space Programme illustrates a gradual rethinking of masculinity in Nigeria, moving

> This article examines how non-gendered forms are viewed concerning fashion styles in sub-Saharan Africa.

beyond the traditional associations with physical strength, toughness, and domestic dominance.[2]

There is a tendency to prescribe gender roles specific to males and females based on sex only (Butler 1990; Butler 2004; Powell 2017). These sex differences give rise to prescribed gender roles that categorise male and female in a binary manner. This binary classification extends to all facets of human existence, normalising what has traditionally been defined as women's and men's clothing. It was thus, considered abnormal or incorrect for a male to wear a dress or any piece of clothing or accessory that was traditionally classified as feminine and vice versa.

It is necessary to point out the misconception that queering identity is synonymous with being queer. This stems from the narrative that ascribes identity to individuals based on certain mannerisms and traits such as clothing, bodily gestures, and speech. This narrative can lead to the misclassification of people based on expressions typically associated with a particular sex. For instance, a cisgender man may wear gender-neutral clothing and be perceived as gay, and the same applies to a cisgender woman who faces issues in classification.

Being queer on the other hand differs from queering identity in that those who are queer identify as gay or anywhere on the queer spectrum. It is a blend of gender identity and expression that makes them distinguishable in society. However, an individual can be queer without engaging in a gender expression that makes them noticeable, thereby avoiding stereotypes. We also contend that an individual can be queer without expressing this in social spaces, sometimes hiding the façade of masculinity or feminity to avoid punitive measures or social othering. Therefore, not every queer man conforms to a fashion that visibly expresses queerness. Since masculinity is one form of social expression for males, the need for further justification of virility can manifest in various aspects of physical appearance, including clothing.

This symbol of masculinity supports the self-verification theory which posits that people's relationships with objects are based on the meanings attached to those objects (Adomaitis et al. 2024, p.4). This suggests that people who identify as gay but express themselves differently may be concerned about their physical appearances and attentive to public opinion. Moreover, people who publically present as heterosexual also worry about their physical appearances as they seek to adhere to specific gender roles. Meanwhile, a pivotal moment in the history of genderlessness arose from the demand for more liberal spaces in the late twentieth century. Today, especially young men who seek freedom to wear any fashion styles, dress beyond styles traditionally attributed to specific genders. Therefore it is inaccurate to equate genderless or gender-neutral fashion with queerness. Butler aptly notes that the concepts of masculinity and femininity are naturalised through performativity (2004, p.42). However, due to its performative nature, gender also allows for the reconceptualisation of these notions in ways that make it possible for people to embrace new ways of being human.

In addition to the above, there is a thread that runs through the perception of nonbinarity: a man can feminise his expressions at will, and a female can do the same in gender-fluid spaces (Fan, 2023: 67, 69). There is a sense of motivation in nonbinarity that is often missing: the freedom to choose alternative possibilities that suit different people. These alternatives impress rather than impose themselves on people. Largely, there seems to be a deviation from the motivation of freedom that should be at the core of the concept. This is most clearly seen in the attribution of the male-female dichotomy and the claim that expressions can distort an established biological equilibrium. This claim is true but incomplete if we neglect a vital aspect that implies people should experience some level of mental shift and free their minds from stereotypes arising from a reductionist understanding of the world. It means that people can choose to wear any piece of clothing that is considered decent within the context of cultural

norms. We evoke cultural norms to refer to the inherent dynamism of culture. Thus, nonbinary fashion is not strictly the claim that a male (queer) person should be allowed to choose other forms of expression. The next question would be: what other forms of expression exist outside of being male or female? The inability of many proponents of gender fluidity to create a gender outside of a third (queer) implicates them in the critique of reductionism. The work of some African designers shows ways to sartorially critique the reductionist logic of what a man should look like, proposing alternative forms of expression.

Queer(ing) and Pluralising Masculinities in Works of African Fashion Designers

Bowstead writes that menswear in Southern and Western Africa is revitalising this area of fashion "by contributing new perspectives, aesthetics, and narratives" (2018, p.174). African fashion designers, like Adeju Thompson of Lagos Space Programme, are actively constructing new ideas about menswear, proposing to consumers and by extension society, alternative and queered fashion and dress practices for self-styling. Self-styling implies "technologies of the self" that hold "social potential, by its capacity, to generate ideas, images and ways of being in the city that were quite different from earlier ones" (Nuttall 2009, p.109). Nuttall further states that these technologies of the self "retain a political edge [that involve] a re-reading, a citing of the [...] past while drawing increasingly on a style which spoke to the future" (2009, p.109). Similarly, the Lagos Space Programme draws from and presents aspects of history in the present while proposing how the future of African masculinities can and will be expressed.

Writing about queer thought in the global South, Pereira asks: "can queer propositions of agency account for the forms chosen to express dissident bodies below the equator? Or, put another way: how do queer propositions of agency relate to chosen forms of expressing nonconforming bodies in the tropics?" (2019, p.7). We engage with these insightful questions by illustrating how African fashion designers reconstruct the sartorial. This process of reconstructing and queering is, as we argue, a technique used by the Lagos Space Programme to propose and pluralise masculinities that can be both African and queer. When using the verb "queering" in the context of fashion and dress, we denote, as Bowstead puts it, "subverting and overturning the common understandings of gender that have tended to lock men and women within rigid binary codes of behavior and, relatedly, as a way of fracturing hegemonic identities into more plural and diffuse subjectivities" (2018, p.124). In other words, it is an act of a fashion brand to facilitate the fashioned body's "escape and disruption of society's prescribed categories" (Mchunu 2023, p.19). Queerness in this sense is a process of unbundling the narrative of uniformity in favour of plurality. We therefore use it as a symbol of submerged voices in fashion practices such as those of fashion designers.

While our focus is on the Lagos Space Programme, the brand's exploration of queerness in fashion does not exist in a vacuum. Other designers and brands across Africa also explore queerness in their work. An example is Clive Rundle's 2010/2011 capsule collection showcased at Paris Fashion Week, titled, "Marie Antoinette returns to Paris after attending a lesbian wedding in Africa". Following Rundle, more brands have emerged including Rich Mnisi, Udiahgebi by Emerie Udiahgebi, Sevaria by Janie Bryan, Nao Serati, Vangei Official by Lolu Vangei, Muyishime by Patrick Muyishime, and Bola Yahaya founded by Bola Taofeek Yahaya. While the growing number of fashion designers exploring queerness indicates a new wave of expression, it is also important to consider the context in which some brands operate–contexts where queer lives exist under criminalising laws. In such situations, the designers demonstrate that fashion can serve both cultural and political purposes that challenge repressive conditions. African fashion designers and brands, including Thompson and the Lagos Space Programme, exercise their creative agency to highlight the irony of a system that refuses to recognise real expressions and identities specifically–queer identities.

The Lagos Space Programme: A Case Study of Fashioning New Masculinities

Sometimes labelled as a gender-neutral and genderless brand, and other times called a non-binary fashion label, the Lagos Space Programme was founded in 2018 (Benissan 2023; Rothery 2024; Fashion Trust Arabia n.d.; Industrie Africa n.d, Frieze 2023). Previously shortlisted for the

2021 LVMH, this award-winning fashion brand also won the International Woolmark Prize 2023 and the Fashion Trust Arabia (FTA): Emerge Prize 2023. The FTA website describes the Lagos Space Programme as offering "intellectual, high-end ready-to-wear collections while exploring parallel concepts through multidisciplinary collaborative projects" (Fashion Trust Arabia n.d). At the time of its launch, the brand states its manifesto as follows: "we will always create objects that promote a sense of national pride, we are Nigerians! Although we create clothes in a globalised world and are inspired by subcultures and movements that don't necessarily originate from Nigeria, all our references are always filtered through a Nigerian lens" (Lagos Space Programme Instagram n.d.). Pereira writes that "drawing out the horizons of different perspectives" has the potential to free queer studies from a paralysing tendency to universalise it (2010, p. 44). By centralizing the 'Nigeria' lens in this manifesto we understand the Lagos Space Programme as acknowledging its locality, which reflects the specific masculinity expressed through its collections.

Our study of the Lagos Space Programme as a fashion brand contributing to the theme of queer artistic production in Africa involved a meticulous process of visual and textual analysis of the brand's official *Instagram* page. The page includes imagery and design statements for each collection, as well as details about the research and design process. The Lagos Space Programme refers to each fashion collection as a 'project' which is followed by a chronological number and the title of that season's project. We could not find any record of the first two projects as the brand's *Instagram* page starts with Project 3, the *Awo-Workwear* collection. It is noted that this is the first collection presented under the Lagos Space Programme brand. This collection is followed by the Spring/Summer 2019 Project 4: *Gurreilla*. Project 5 is the Fall 2021 collection, *Aṣọ Lànkí, Kí Ató Ki Ènìyàn,* which translates to "we greet dress before we greet its wearer". The subsequent collections include Project 6: *Osun Sèègèsi*, and Project 7: *Post-Adire*. Following Project 7 is Project 8: *Cloth as a queer archive*. At the time of writing this article, the most recent collection was Project 9: *Invitation to Ojude Oba,* an Autumn/Winter 2024/2025 collection shown at Paris Fashion Week in January 2024.

Most projects are accompanied by fashion films that align with the brand's concept of representing queerness in works of fashion. The Instagram page is also rich in data, providing links to articles featuring Thompson's interviews with various publications that include *Vogue Business*, *Another Mag*, *Industria Africa*, and *Boy.Brother.Friend*. The combination of the projects' titles, design items in the collections, styling, imagery (both still and motion), and inspiration provide strong evidence of reconstructing and queering masculinities that are both African and queer.

Queering and Re/constructing Lagosian Masculinities: Key Moments in the Lagos Space Programme

The Lagos Space Programme is founded on Thompson's desire for freedom. From *The Fashion Agent Instagram* page (n.d.), it is explicitly clear that their experiences as someone who was othered due to their outfits largely inspired the fashion style expressed through the brand. Thompson recounts a 2019 incident involving a unit of the Nigerian police force, where they were physically assaulted and detained for being perceived as

"we will always create objects that promote a sense of national pride, we are Nigerians! Although we create clothes in a globalised world and are inspired by subcultures and movements that don't necessarily originate from Nigeria, all our references are always filtered through a Nigerian lens"

queer because of their clothing: "This traumatic experience pushed me to approach my practice as a form of protest, having these conversations around gender by highlighting cultural examples like the gender-bending ritual ceremony of the *Gẹlẹdẹ́* masquerades" (The Fashion Agent n.d.). This comment indicates that while protest motivated Thompson's style, the Lagos Space Programme has evolved into a form of decolonial fashion that integrates relevant modernity and tradition from both the Western and African contexts. In this situation, fashion is no longer a contest between opposites, but a critical engagement that provides reasons for influential intentional choices.

We examine some key fashion moments by the Lagos Space Programme that visually showcase a contextual and localised queerness that opens up other forms of masculinity. Brajalo discusses "queer(ing) surface" as fashion designers' practices in their use of fabrics and patterns to express queerness (2020, p.48). The Lagos Space Programme's queer(ing) of surface, a prominent feature of its concepts, has attracted some critique. For example, a commentator reacted to the Lagos Space Programme's *Instagram* post with the comment: "You can't force 'queer' theories on everything. *Na wa*. Not anti 'queer' *o*... it's just that the issue is being forced into narratives that maybe a tad forced and contrived to fit the bill... just my thoughts *o*... I'm not right nor am I wrong... it's all love" (Lagos Space Programme Instagram, n.d.). Despite this critique, the brand persistently reveals through fashion a narrative of individuals who actually walk the streets of Lagos, rather than an imagined notion that queer lives and masculinities are non-existent in this sociocultural space.

In multiple collections, the Lagos Space Programme has intentionally melded influences drawn from diverse sources as expressed in one of their manifestos: "we will always state our references, we will never be ashamed of this" (Lagos Space Programme Instagram 2018). Mixing British tailoring with Yoruba heritages from the *Ojude Oba* festival, the *Gẹlẹdẹ́* [3] ceremony, the *oríkì* concept, and the *adire* resist dye technique which has appeared multiple times in the collections– are examples of drawing of this eclectic approach. These ideas demonstrate how "queer communities share their stories and messages through languages, symbols, and gestures unique to their groups" as stated in relation to Project 8: *Cloth as queer archive*.

In Project 4: *Gurreilla*, Thompson drew inspiration from the life of the late African-American composer Julius Eastman, particularly his identity as a black, queer man grappling with addiction and mental health issues. Eastman was known for giving provocative titles to his compositions such as *Evil Nigger* and *Gay Guerrilla*. The title of *Gurreilla*/ Project 4, even with its different spelling, clearly references Eastman's music. The inspiration for this collection was also informed by a 1980 Eastman interview with Marie Cieri. In the interview, the composer uses the Tibetan saint Milarepa as an example to explain how certain ways of dressing can be perceived as provocative by some:

> And I think the thing to do is to always think 'what is the most natural thing.' You know, like Milarepa, he used to go around with his prick showing because he had his little, he was, you know, a Tibetan saint, you know, and he had, his clothes were just torn so he only wore one thing. So it was torn and people would say, 'Oh my god, you poor thing. Why don't you dress up?' But he said, 'You know, there's nothing wrong with my prick.' It's just natural, he said, that people are ashamed of things that they oughtn't be ashamed of. So, in that way, he was really outside of the norm. But in reality, he was just being natural.

We were especially drawn to a fashion look modelled by Eze Michael. Similar to Eastman's minimalist musical compositions, this look from the collection featured clean lines and depicts provocative necklines that exposed parts of the male body, such as the neck, back, and shoulders, traditionally hidden in menswear in Nigeria. Thompson's collection positions Eastman as a vessel through which the male body deliberately disturbs expectations of menswear in Lagos and the broader context, thereby pluralising masculinity.

Project 5: *Aṣọ Lànkí, Kí Ató Ki Ènìyàn* takes its name from a Yoruba proverb that translates to 'we greet dress before we greet its wearer', an apt title that reflects the now widely accepted theory of fashion as a visual language and form of expression (Barnard 2002; Deplu 2015; Hopkins 2021; Kaiser & Green 2022; Loureiro 2022). The collection was launched at Arise Fashion Week

and later, in the same year, showcased in the fashion film *Aso: Fashion as visual oríkì* at Milan Fashion Week. Composed of indigo blue, brown, and grey as the prominent colour palette with hints of white, this collection was accessorised with leather and python skin platform mules in black, off-white, and brown with indigo-blue silk in soles. Brass jewellery and sculptural pieces hand-cast in Benin City were additional accessories. The fashion included, among others, reversible Yoruba wrapper skirts styled in layers of twos or threes. There were also wide-legged trousers with drawstring waists and a stylised venture vest with cut-out details. As in previous collections, Thompson also explored knitwear, with some designed to resemble masks by covering the entire faces of models. As the collection's title indicates, fashion communicates queer artistic production within this African context. The combined use of the textiles and techniques shows Thompson depicting a fashioned body that reflects a plurality of masculinities. To dissect the communicative power of this collection, we pay close attention to one item: the masks.

The Lagos Space Programme posted on its official *Instagram* page "Dan Mask" (1989), a work by deceased Nigerian photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode, as a reference image. Fani-Kayode's work addresses personal tensions between his Yoruba upbringing, race, and homosexuality. This photographic work features a dreadlocked black male who is obscured as he holds a mask from the Dan ethnic group. Fani-Kayode's work is semi-autobiographical in its references to sexuality, race, subjecthood, and spirituality. Thompson's work is described as "dissecting the intersection of Thompson's life experiences, thereby communicating ideas of individuality, and proposing new ways to understand beauty" (Fashion Trust Arabia n.d). Like Fani-Kayode, Thompson links the mask to queerness in an innovative way. In the Prigent interview, Thompson explains that the masks in the Project 5 collection were inspired by the ritual masquerades of the *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* ceremony which is visually known for its array of masks. Below, we contextualise this ceremony by providing a brief background, followed by our analysis of Thompson's incorporation of the ceremony's multiple ideas to reconstruct and queer masculinities.

The *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* tradition has been the subject of academic discourse by numerous scholars (including Drewal & Drewal 1990; Lawal 1996; Cameron 1998; Miller 2001; Bentor 2002; Andrew 2014; Willis 2018). The *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* community masquerade is practiced by the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria including the Ọhọri, Ifọnyin, Ketu, Ibarapa, Ẹgbado, Awori, Anago, and Ṣabe subgroups (Drewal and Drewal 1990:7). Historical records indicate that it was also practiced in the Republic of Benin, Cuba, Sierra Leone, and Brazil (Willis 2018, p.42). In his seminal text *The Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ Spectacle*, Lawal (1996, p.xiii) notes that by combining dance, art, songs, and satire, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* performances "are meant to promote the social and spiritual well-being of a given community." It is primarily known for honouring and celebrating the power of the matriarch and deified foremother i.e., Ìyà *Nl*à - 'The Great Mother' (Drewal and Drewal 1990, p.7). The Ìyà *Nl*à principle aligns with its message of peace asserting that "human beings can relate to one another as children of the same mother and so think less of malicious acts" (Lawal 1996, p.xiv). During the practice, the celebrated female figure is embodied by men, a topic also discussed by Thompson when explaining the research for their collection.

The masquerade performance features a masked performer who is accompanied by dancers, drummers, and singers. The performer wears a carved wooden mask resembling a female figure, metal anklet rattles, and a garb made of various coloured and patterned fabric panels and raffia (Willis 2018, p.12).[4] As a means of expressing the spiritual, aesthetic, performative, emotional, and social, Willis asserts that *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́*:

> offered people an opportunity to comment on the world around them. As a masquerade geared toward appeasement, conciliation, and recognition of the diversity of the groups [...] *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* offered a medium for celebrating diversity and channeling it toward solidarity. (2018, p.108)

Doubling is another defining feature of *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* in two distinctive ways. Firstly, doubling manifests in the performances which are divided into the nighttime *Ẹfẹ* performance and the daytime *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* performance, "one cannot take place without the other" (Drewal and Drewal 1990, p.11). Secondly, the "singing male masquerader, *Oro*

Efè, must be preceded by a partner, either male or female, who is viewed as a companion, wife, or twin. In *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́*, masqueraders traditionally perform in identical pairs" (Drewal and Drewal 1990, p.11). Thompson explores the idea that the *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* ceremony celebrates matriarchy, even though the performance is embodied by men, which they refer to as the gender-bending aspect of the ceremony. Notably, in an earlier scholarly work, Miller (2001) focuses on the aspect of doubling and embodiment, calling it cross-dressing. Thompson connects the *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́*'s spirit of conciliation and recognition of diversity and uses the term gender-bending as a queer element in the fashion collection. Thompson comments on the limitations of confining masculine identity to a singular and essentialised sartorial expression. Through the Lagos Space Programme, Adeju Thompson proposes plural masculinities through fashion, reconstructing and queering these identities.

The Lagos Space Programme explains the supporting film, *Fashion as visual oríkì*, as beginning with an understanding of "*oríkì* [as] a form of citation poetry, [but] a visual form of *oríkì*, as the arrangement of patterns, colours, shapes, and textures on a figure can cohere into a powerful gestalt form - a 'look' - that can trigger an affective response in the perceiver." We are drawn to the arrangement of different visual forms to evoke an affective response. Pereira asserts that when writing about queer lives in the global South, "we must think of the affects and affectations that can dislocate these universalising and far-removed theories toward local histories. *Queer* [emphasis in original] theory would then be affected and reconfigured in processes of translation brought about by these other-experiences" (2019, p.44). This assertion is important as we observe Thompson making use of what can be defined as traditional Nigerian techniques and garments like *adire*, brass works, and wrapper skirts, expressed through concepts that connect the designer and other queer people such as Eastman and Fani-Kayode. By referencing these individuals in works of fashion, Thompson offers a visual *oríkì*, a poetic intertextual reference that illustrates how their ideas responded to Eastman and Fani-Kayode's works, who like Thompson, used queerness, identity, and history as themes.

Although not centred around queer icons, Project 8: *Cloth as a queer archive* explores the concept that ties "together Yoruba heritage, Eurocentric dress codes with playful queer iconography in a marriage of traditional and contemporary" (Lagos Space Programme 2023). Its accompanying fashion film *'come to me, i'm already here'* was shot at the Sacred Art School in Osogbo by filmmaker Isabel Okoro. This film aligns closely with the collection as it "plays on the idea of continuously returning to yourself, a concept central to queer being" (Lagos Space Programme 2023). The project's title demonstrates how queer archives inform contemporary fashion in this Lagosian context. It continues the archiving process focused on the queering of masculinities. This echoes a point made in the African LGBTI declaration that states "reclaiming and sharing our stories (past and present, our lived realities, our contributions to society and our hopes for the future" (African LGBTI Manifesto/Declaration 2010 n.d).

> "The wrapper skirt is worn by both men and women in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria."

The strength of the Lagos Space Programme's crafting of African queer expressions, what we describe as queer and plural masculinities in the Lagosian context, cleverly aligns the concept, with the visual and the sartorial. Styling the looks for the photoshoot of Project 5: *Aṣọ Lànkí, Kí Ató Ki Ènìyàn* is worth discussing. One of the more striking images on *Instagram* shows model Seun Akinyosoye in a soft pose, cross-legged, sitting next to a *Jojo* tank with his face at a three-quarter angle and eyes looking away from the camera. Akinyosoye wears a reversible indigo blue wrapper skirt and a hand-knotted wool vest. The neckline of the vest is so low that it delicately exposes the chest. Exposing certain features of the body through style lines, as Thompson does, is a recurring theme in their work.

Brass accessories feature prominently including rings, bangles, armbands, and a more experimental piece that resembles the brim of a cap. The wrapper skirt is worn by both men and women in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria. In styling the look, Thompson demonstrates an awareness of the body as an active participant in rethinking certain notions of masculinity and reconstructing them into new expressions of masculinities. As Kaiser and Green assert "the body is not a passive medium that reflects an essence, but rather actively negotiates and performs sexual subjectivities through style-fashion-dress" (2022, p.243).

Thompson writes about Project 7: *Post-Adire* that the technique employed by the Lagos Space Programme takes from *adire* as a mode of storytelling through resist dye techniques on textiles adding further that

> I was intrigued by the idea behind this process, wearing stories on one's body. I wanted to explore Adire in a contemporary way, so I developed my own process I call 'Post-Adire'; an opportunity for me to push Adire dyeing techniques into new contexts like knitwear and creating motifs that are important for me (https://www.instagram.com/lagosspaceprogramme/).

Over the years, Thompson's work and exploration of ideas in the different fashion projects demonstrate the fashion designer as a producer and a commentator on society and its manifestations. This case study examines a fashion designer who, through a persistent attitude, showcases an African queer voice shaping the landscape by highlighting the power of the visual and sartorial in presenting queer identities.

Multivalent Alternatives to Re/constructing Masculinities through African Fashion

The various projects from the Lagos Space Programme analysed in the previous section hold the potential to spark new conversations about reconstructing gender expression by challenging binaries through sartoriality. One factor that reinforces the dichotomy between sexes is the issue of bivalence, which is rooted in Aristotelian logic.[5] This kind of engagement positions society in opposition and structures reality accordingly. It is this same logic that defines the opposite of white as black, creates right-wrong distinction, and categorises male-female, among others. Using the male-female binary can be problematic for several reasons. Such categorisation amplifies gender as a non-fluid concept and excludes any identities that do not fit within this binary. The male-female distinction is more relevant in forming multivalent logical alternatives. This is because multivalent alternatives acknowledge the existence of binaries while also allowing for complementary relationships. Thus, under multivalent logics that differ from Aristotelian logic, male and female cannot be confined to a binary.

In this context, amid persecution, some fashion enthusiasts and designers, such as Thompson, have taken bold steps to incorporate gender-neutral fashion in their collections. Whether the increasing prominence of queer fashion in Nigeria can serve as a catalyst for societal change and help reformulate perceptions of gender and sexuality remains to be seen. Queer fashion has the potential to provide a platform for marginalised voices to engage in activism that could lead to social change within Nigeria.

Conclusion

The differences in identitarian forms associated with gender align with fashion expressions in the context of queer(ing) fashion. We focused on the Lagos Space Programme and the new ideas their fashion styles introduced in Nigeria. Nigeria is certainly not isolated from the rest of the world. While projecting values and norms to validate their identity, there must be awareness of other societies that may be adversely affected when a particular masculine identity is upheld. Some traditional practices should be completely overhauled if they impede development, as not all changes in values and norms lead to negative outcomes for adapting societies. Africa is also connected to the rest of the world and every society should be open to adapting changes that are not inherently harmful, as they may bring new possibilities. In this light, different disciplines approaching masculinity from their various perspectives conclude that perceptions of the male and female genders have been marked by biases. Furthermore, because gender is a social construct, the perception of gender expressiveness should be flexible. Therefore, maleness and masculinity are not antithetical to queerness, as these should not be seen as binary forms, especially among some African cultures where both can intersect depending on the individual preferences of each person.

Notes

1 The topic of challenging the misguided notion that delinks queerness and African identities has been studied previously (See for example, Gevisser and Cameron 1994; Livermon 2012; Ekine 2013; Ekine and Abbas 2013; Ossome 2013; Matebeni 2014).

2 We acknowledge the scarcity of literature that speaks directly to Lagosian masculinities. However, we have made references to some sources that speak to masculinity, especially in western parts of Nigeria where Lagos is located (see Olawoye et al, 2019; Chigbu, 2019).

3 It is important to clarify our use of text. In their studies, Cameron (1998), Miller (2001), Bentor (2002), and Willis (2018) consistently capitalise the word Gelede without any special characters. Andrew (2014) adopts a similar style but uses it in italic form (*Gelede*). Lawal (1996), an insider to the *Gẹlẹdẹ́* ceremony, writes the word using Álífábẹ̀ẹ̀tì Yorùbá. For this article, we adopt this writing style when referencing the word and also apply the italic format. This also applies to other words from the Yoruba language used in this article.

4 We recommend that those interested in a more comprehensive history and origin of the Gẹlẹdé masquerade read *The Gẹlẹdé spectacle, embodying the sacred in Yoruba art* by Babatunde Lawal (1996) and *Masquerading politics: kinship, gender, and ethnicity in a Youruba town* by John Thabiti Willis (2018).

5 See Jonathan Chimakonam, *Ezumezu: A System of Logic for African Philosophy and Studies*. (Cham: Springer 2019), pp. 151-152; Derek Cabrera and Laura Cabrera, *Systems Thinking Made Simple: New Hope for Solving Wicked Problems*. (Plectica Publishing, 2015), pp. 126-129.

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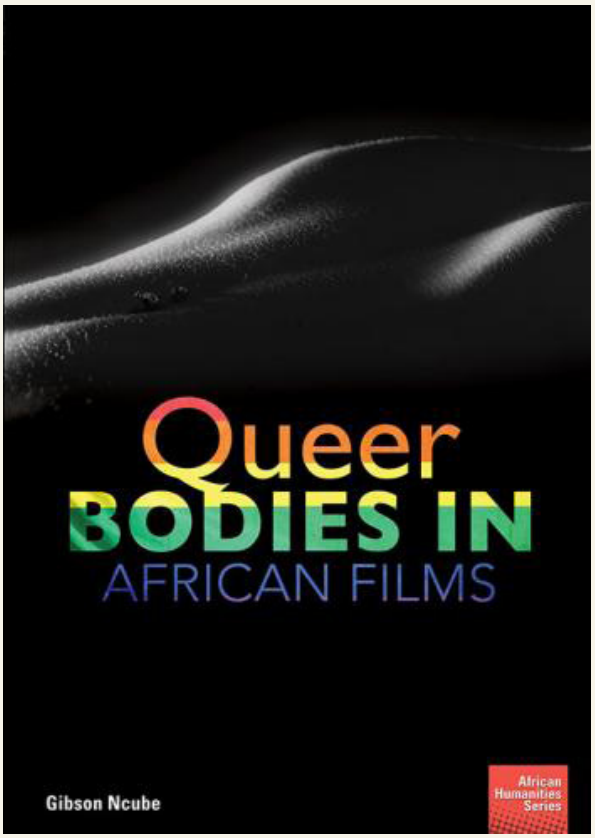

A Pan-African Exploration of Queer Embodiment in African Film: A Book Review of Gibson Ncube's *Queer Bodies in African Films* (NISC, December 2022)

By Jarred Thompson

Gibson Ncube's monograph produces a Pan-African archive of films that grapple with the specificities of queer embodiment in several regions on the African continent. *Queer Bodies in African Films* does important intra-continental theorising about what it means to be queer in Africa, or African *and* queer, in both North and sub-Saharan African contexts, with a corpus that maps filmed queer bodies in selected Maghrebian (chapter one), Egyptian (chapter two), East African (chapter three), and South African films (chapter four). Throughout, Ncube centres the filmed queer body as a site where "multiple and often intersecting discourses and narratives" (Ncube 2022, p.2) contest for legitimacy within their given cultural milieus. In this frame, the author remains attentive to "how the touching of bodies and rubbing together of physical bodies produce feelings and affection and forge (dis)connections" (2). As Ncube avers, this kind of pan-African consideration of queerness is lacking in Queer African Studies, and the monograph provides a useful entry point for scholars looking to do similar intracontinental research.

In Chapter One, "Silent and silenced bodies in Maghrebian queer films", Ncube observes a common trope of silence, secrecy and muteness surrounding filmed queer bodies in the work of filmmakers such as Nadia El Fani, Abdellah Taïa, and Nadir Moknèche. In this survey of Maghrebian film, the queer body is seen to "blur the lines between what can be said or unsaid, presented or unpresented, and what is knowable and unknowable, about Arab-Muslim sexualities" (30). Issues of language, translation and whether the films can be viewed in their original dialectal Arabic or watched via English or French translation is brought up, especially in terms of how queerness, as a globalised project with a predominant Western lexicon, is translated into local expressions. Ncube argues that existing Arabic vocabularies show how, "in North Africa, queer sexuality is viewed as that which people do and not necessarily as what or who they are" (21). This observation is important in delineating the (dis)continuities in queer expression between the global iconography of queerness and the local embodiments of it.

Yet, although Ncube accedes that the films' French subtitles are "significant in countering the lack of adequate linguistic terms in dialectal Arabic to describe queerness and queer sexual experiences positively", one does wonder whether further research on dialectal Arabic and/or references to queer writers working in Arabic dialects might have proved useful in developing a linguistic groundedness to Ncube's analyses that did not defer to the subtitles of French (23). Nevertheless, the chapter is insightful in the ways it identifies the trope of silence surrounding filmed queer bodies, noting that this mirrors the social silence queer Maghrebian subjectivities face daily. In such an environment of social silence and so-called tacit tolerance, the skin of queer bodies and its "minutest visual cues" are the means through which the filmmakers encode Maghrebian queer embodiments (43).

Whereas tropes of social silence might surround queer bodies in Maghrebian film, Ncube notes, in Chapter Two's "Ambivalent queer bodies in Egyptian films", how filmed queer bodies emerge as ambivalent subjectivities who shroud their non-normative desires in a combination of "what is verbally voiced and what is expressed through diverse codes and gestures" (59). Reading Marwan Hamed's *Imarat Yácubyan* [The Yacoubian Building] (2006) and Salah Abu Seif's *Hammam al-Malatili* [Malatili Bathhouse] (1973), Ncube argues that queer subjects deploy strategies of ambiguous language and gesture to signal their non-normative desire, often seeking loopholes in a sociocultural fabric which, nevertheless, still marginalises them. Such loopholes are identified in *Imarat Yácubyan*, where Hatem, a queer male character, convinces Abd, the man he is having an affair with, that their sexual relationship is "not against religious doctrines, and that although Islam is against adultery, theirs is not adultery as it will never result in a child" (51). In this context, I found that Ncube could have explored more explicitly the relation between queerness and the production of socio-cultural loopholes, especially in terms of how queer subjects exploit loopholes in socio-cultural codes so as to allow for alternative queer embodiments to inhabit a heteropatriarchal body politic. Despite this, Ncube does maintain his attention on how queer bodies so often become sites for negotiating deep anxieties about tradition, modernity, religion, class and politics across the African continent and, indeed, in the global imaginary, too.

Furthermore, while Ncube draws on the work of Brian Whittaker (2006) and other scholars to assert that "Arab-Muslim societies have been known to be tolerant of non-normative sex if conducted in private", there remains a level of violence and pathology attached to the filmed queer Egyptian bodies that seems to undercut this assertion (47). How does a cultural analyst, then, balance these competing claims? In other words, I wonder what is meant by the word 'tolerance', especially when the films illustrate how violence against queer people is inflicted on them in their private domains, where so-called 'tolerance' is said to reside and where both films reason that their protagonists' have 'become' queer through childhood trauma and abuse. Though Ncube refers to this as a form of homophobic "pop-psychology", too little time is spent on unpacking this trope in Egyptian film, considering where its roots might originate, and the trajectories that such a psychologising of queerness might take (58). This is an area of queer Egyptian filmmaking that may require further research.

Moving to considering filmed queer bodies in East African film, Ncube reflects upon "Legible queer and trans bodies" in Chapter Three, making a

distinction between queer visibility and legibility (61). Queer visibility, for Ncube, tends to be "perfunctory and superficial" (62) whereas queer legibility is when queer bodies enter the discursive space and become "legitimate and acceptable gendered and sex bodies" (63). Ncube points out that queer legibility "marks a pivotal step towards the *normalisation* of queer bodies. Once queer bodies have been *normalised*, they cease to be marginalised, invalidated and nullified" (63, my emphasis). I wondered how Ncube reconciles notions of queerness to structures of normativity. It seemed that normativity was being privileged in this chapter as something queer people wanted to be absorbed into, and I questioned what the drawbacks were for queer subjects who desire 'the normative' uncritically. In relation to this, what is the 'futurity' of queerness if its teleology is to be absorbed into the 'legitimate' and the 'legible', writ large. These were questions left unanswered.

However, the chapter makes provocative claims using Lindsey Green-Sims' registers of resistance to describe the "imperfect forms of negotiation" (2022, p.9) that filmed queer bodies in East Africa seem to take up as queer characters "become legible [...] not through bold and overt political acts, but rather through daily actions" (Ncube 2022, p.67). In Peter Murimi's *I am Samuel* (2020), the queer protagonist comes out to his rural-dwelling parents in a creative, non-verbal way that is interesting for the way it subverts the common linguistic trope of 'coming-out' to one's parents. Ncube reads this as the queer characters' forging "a physical language" (73) where the proximity of Samual and his lover to Samuel's parents produces an "affective solidarity" in which cooking, praying and playing sport are queered in everyday acts of minor subversion (74). This sense of a happy queer ending is continued in Wanuri Kahiu's *Rafiki* (2018), where the utopic image of female queer intimacy, vulnerability and world-making is seen as intervening in the overwhelmingly gloomy and dystopic trope of queer subjectivities who are forced to face down violence and inevitable death.

Interestingly, the only documentary in the book features the only transgender character discussed. Jonny von Wallström's *Pearl of Africa* (2016) is a "documentary [that] follows the journey of Cleopatra Kambugu, a Ugandan born transgender woman who decides to live her difference openly" (Ncube 2022, p.83). In this section, Ncube brings up the issue that "[s]ome trans Africans feel strongly that their gender is fixed and defined" (83) and that, for Cleopatra Kambugu, "her gender is not fluid. She feels that she is in the wrong body and that through the surgeries, she is moving towards a point in which there is a harmony between her body, her identity, and her gender" (83). This sense of 'moving towards' one's identity is described by Cleopatra as "adventuring" where the body is a project, a work in progress (84). By the end of the discussion, Ncube asserts that "the trans body is the embodiment par excellence of transgression in the way it rejects notions of fixed identities" (86). To this, I was curious as to how Ncube conceptually balances this notion of desiring fixity that some transgendered subjects are said to seek with the *rejection of fixity* that he claims their embodiment enacts. Similarly, Cleopatra's lover, Nelson, seems overtly silenced in this discussion; this even though it is a scene *between* Cleopatra and Nelson—where the couple test out differently-sized breast implants—that forms the erotic centre of the section. What is 'trans' about Nelson's phenomenological encounter with Cleopatra's body? In what ways does he have to 'adventure' to harmonise *his* desire with his gender identity? There was a missed opportunity here to think through queer African embodiment as it relates to Nelson's heterosexual understanding of himself and its relation to Cleopatra's transgender experience of her own corporeality.

In the chapter on South African film, intersectionality is foregrounded because of the ways colonialism and apartheid have linked race, class and gender in intimate and inextricable ways. Chapter Four's "The intersectional body in South African films" looks at two films from the apartheid period (Shamim Sarif's *The World Unseen* [2007] and Oliver Hermanus' *Moffie* [2019]) and two films from the post-apartheid period (*Inxeba/The Wound* [2017] directed by John Trengove, and *While You Weren't Looking* [2015] directed by Catherine Stewart). In this chapter, the analyses of the films seemed to have garnered uneven attention, as *Inxeba/The Wound* and *Moffie* get a depth of theoretical application that Sarif's and Stewart's films do not. This is especially pertinent when Ncube mentions that, in Stewart's film, there is a moment where a character observes, "'If you can queer gender, you

can queer everything: black and white, culture, nature, object and subject. And that is freedom'" (118). This remark is possibly the most interesting that Ncube references from the film and yet its resonances, especially in terms of filmic form in *While You Weren't Looking*, remain underexplored. Notwithstanding this, the chapter is a worthwhile survey of a selection of South African queer films for scholars interested in representations of intersectional queer embodiments and the politics of (post)apartheid that undergird the makings of race, class and gender as integral assemblages for theorising queer life in South Africa in its intimate, social and public dimensions.

By deftly moving across Francophone, Anglophone, Northern and Sub-Saharan regions on the African continent Ncube has certainly added to the integral work of developing an intracontinental discourse on filmed queer bodies, and the strategies filmmakers deploy to get at the phenomenological and corporeal experience of context-specific queerness. Overall, his corpus illustrates "how national and regional specificities produce particular forms of queer embodiment, subjectivity and performance" (121). While there was a distinct emphasis on queer bodies and the narrative tropes that stylise them, future research might focus more on the cinematographic (dis)continuities amongst queer films in Africa as it pertains to colour palette, sound, camera angles, editing, music, mis-en-scene and the like—formal (dis)continuities that might themselves prove useful in critically mapping the filmic techniques of queer African affective geographies on the continent. While there were moments where this was discussed in the monograph, a more formalist account of queer African film may expand into other areas of film production that shape an audience's experience of filmed queer African bodies and their intimacies.

A Book Review of Joe Jackson's *Kahlil Joseph and the Audiovisual Atlantic: Music, Modernity, and Transmedia Art* (Bloomsbury Academic 2024)

By Nedine Moonsamy

The first of its kind, this book offers unique and concentrated insight into Kahlil Joseph's oeuvre. It takes seriously the role of black popular culture and the complex space that creators like Joseph occupy in the global capitalist imaginary. At the outset, Jackson opines that his assessment of Joseph is not merely a celebratory take, but one that immerses Joseph, and his work, in contemporary issues of class, capitalism, and race. What emerges is a careful exploration of the vibrant and productive contradictions that mobilise Joseph's career. Jackson argues that Joseph's success comes from navigating these tensions – as opposed to seeking to resolve them – which has made him a central figure of the Audiovisual Atlantic.

In seeking to explore the Audiovisual Atlantic as an aesthetic, Paul Gilroy's earlier insights on the Black Atlantic are duly interrogated; Jackson questions what Gilroy's identification of black countercultural production means in a world where Black identity and anti-capitalistic ideologies are inevitably subject to commodification. Jackson also makes other crucial interventions, like considering the wider dimensions of the audio*visual* (as opposed to Gilroy's auditory emphasis in understanding diasporic connection) as well as the neglected geographies of blackness – like the Caribbean and Africa – that often garner less attention in the global black imaginary.

While many shy away from biographical analysis, Jackson draws generative parallels between Joseph's life in chapter one and his early work in chapter two. This comparative reading creates awareness of how Joseph's personal biography challenges stable notions of identity, which clearly informs the foundations of his creative outlook in the media industry. As a result of his personal and professional agility, Joseph's audiovisual art captures the joy and trauma of contemporary Black identity through his creative experimentation, but these works are also susceptible to reinforcing stereotypes about Blackness and perpetuating discursive oppression. In this regard, Jackson argues that "Joseph's audiovisual works are both meeting points *and* sites of contestation where different parts of the world interact" (p.40). As Jackson argues, Kahlil Joseph plays with, and even contests, the divide between marketing and cinema, which speaks to the existential condition of Blackness as both counterculturally creative and yet overdetermined by neoliberal capitalism.

Chapter three is an eloquent exploration of the history of the music video, which further illustrates how Joseph draws on this legacy while also corrupting it through his blurring of music videos, films and adverts. Jackson boldly challenges Joseph's appeals to artistic and independent creative integrity by exploring how his work raises ethical concerns about the commercialisation of African American experiences. Yet in comparing Kahlil Joseph's and Derek Pike's *I Need a Dollar*, Jackson demonstrates how Joseph's rendition "offer[s] helpful avenues for articulating feelings and sensations which transcend the impersonal logic and mechanics of the marketplace" (p.97). As he argues, the audiovisual makes an appeal to the affective and sensorial aspects of the human condition, letting it bleed in-between the gaps of capitalistic categorisation, which allows for a new countercultural sensibility to emerge.

Chapter four addresses how Joseph's involvement in the community arts space has also allowed for new countercultural possibilities. Through his founding of The Underground Museum, and his willingness to crossover into the elitist gallery space, Joseph challenges the Eurocentricism of museums by altering perceptions of popular culture as mass consumerism. Exhibiting collaborations with *Flying Lotus* and Kendrick Lamar in art galleries blends the high and the low and interrogates the limits of the museum as a space for Black expression. Also, in this chapter, I enjoyed how Joseph's *Flying Lotus* collaborations are explored through the lens of Afrofuturism. Given that Afrofuturism explores black identity at the margins of the Human space-time trajectory and harnesses disruption as an aesthetic for alternative expression, it provides keen insight into how Blackness orients itself with the aporia of modernity, and a more affirmative exploration of what Afrofuturism *also enables* would have been a good counterbalance to Jackson's scepticism that this too succumbs to the dangers of a neoliberal black aesthetic.

In chapter five, Jackson provides luminous analyses of Joseph's collaborations with British artists like FKA Twigs and Sampha which highlights how black popular culture is realised as a liberatory aesthetic for artistic freedom and self-expression. Moreover, these collaborative works, "fluctuating at the borders of distinguishable media forms", are also subject to geographical interpretation as Joseph's stylistic fluidity is seen as indicative of broader Black and Afrodiasporic identity and aesthetics (p.117). Yet despite Joseph's ability to generate points of diasporic connection, Jackson also unpacks how a work like *Process* (2017) "undermines the countercultural messages that it articulates so eloquently" since the Sierra Leonean dancers involved in the work were initially unable to access it on their local distribution channels (p.156).

The final chapter continues to think about "the uneven flows of knowledge" and the "imbalanced framework for distribution" that persist in the African diaspora as Jackson unpacks the rise of

contemporary African diasporic arts, which has garnered exposure for creatives like Baloji and Jenn Nkiru (p.156). Yet in comparison to the focused framing in previous chapters, the connection between the contemporary African diaspora and more recent works from Joseph's oeuvre, like *Flypaper* and *BLKNWS*, seems opaque. While the archival intersplicing of Joseph's work "generates alternative forms of sociality", it is unclear about how much of this interaction seeks to include contemporary Africa (p.181). Hence, while the inventiveness of *BLKNWS* certainly speaks to the awareness of the digital spread of global black identity, the work can also be critiqued as an echo chamber of African American identity that perpetuates the exclusion of the 'dead zones' of the African diaspora.

Overall, Jackson's first book is a thorough analysis of the possibilities and limits of audiovisual artistic practice especially as it pertains to the global Black imaginary. This book is a welcomed intervention that affords black popular culture and Kahlil Joseph the focused and nuanced attention it so deserves. It must also be noted that just as Jackson commends Kahlil Joseph for his ability to disrupt elitist paradigms, Jackson's focused meditation on his oeuvre also situates black popular culture into disciplinary studies where it is often excluded.